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BLUMHOUSE GAMES' NEW INDIE HORROR

Why the movie studio is betting big on gaming frights

→ DEV ACCESS

STARSHIP TROOPERS SQUASHES BUGS

Johnny Rico introduces us to ST: Extermination's PS5 debut!

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Welcome

Who says it's a quiet period for gaming? This year's annual Hot 50 might be one of the hardest we've had to put together, with so many we wanted to put on the list, and loads we couldn't find room to include (though we'll have more in issues to come, of course).

What wasn't difficult was our picking our top game, which also features on the cover: Astro Bot (p74). The little guy isn't just back to set another platforming high bar, he also represents a resurgence of family friendly fun that's been lacking in the high-budget space for a while. PS5 owners must agree too, given pre-orders seem to be going strong.

It's not a solo sea change either. We also came away impressed by Lego Horizon Adventures (p70), which makes PlayStation history by launching on PC and Nintendo Switch simultaneously with PS5. The more who get to play PlayStation's medium-leading games, the better, we say – and the blocky take on the series is a superb new approach.

That's far from all. We've finally got in-game footage and a release date for Dragon Age: The Veilguard (p50); Lost Records: Bloom & Rage (p66) continues to impress us with its narrative; and Monster Hunter Wilds (p56) is taking the beastie battler to a whole new level. Plus Star Wars Outlaws (p62), Assassin's Creed Shadows (p68), and Marvel Rivals (p34). The only thing we're more worried about than finding the time to play it all is the critical hit to our wallets – there's so much to play.

We also take a closer look at Blumhouse Games (p6), the gaming division of the horror movie film distributor that's backing indie creators to bring us a new generation of terror. Reviews are all about cutting-edge updates too. SMTV: Vengeance (p84) is a stunning PS5 debut, Elden Ring: Shadow Of The Erdtree (p92) is FromSoftware's biggest and best DLC to date, and Alan Wake II: Night Springs (p95) delights with bite-size episodes. There's never been a better time to game, so we hope you find a new favourite within these pages. 'Til next time...!

Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR
play@futurenet.com
@MrOscarTK

GAME OF THE MONTH
Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance
BEST BOT
Astro Bot

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NEWSLETTER

THIS MONTH'S HOT HOUSE

Luke Kemp
CONTRIBUTOR
Having a Riot, Robo-Luke deploys into Valorant. How does it stack up against the slew of live service shooters heading to PS5?

GAME OF THE MONTH
Still Wakes The Deep
BEST BOT
Bot...any Manor

Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
Lost Records? Not to worry, as Jess recorded it. Enjoy her found chat with the devs of this hella '90s adventure.

GAME OF THE MONTH
AWII: Night Springs
BEST BOT
Aigis (Persona 3)

Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
Aloy's original adventures weren't enough to hook Mim, forcing Sony to greenlight a Lego version. Will this be the time?

GAME OF THE MONTH
Still Wakes The Deep
BEST BOT
Clank (Ratchet & Clank)

Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
Finally an explanation for Milf's cats sniffing his PS5: Astro Bot and friends have been living inside all along!

GAME OF THE MONTH
Elden Ring: SOTE
BEST BOT
BT (Titanfall 2)

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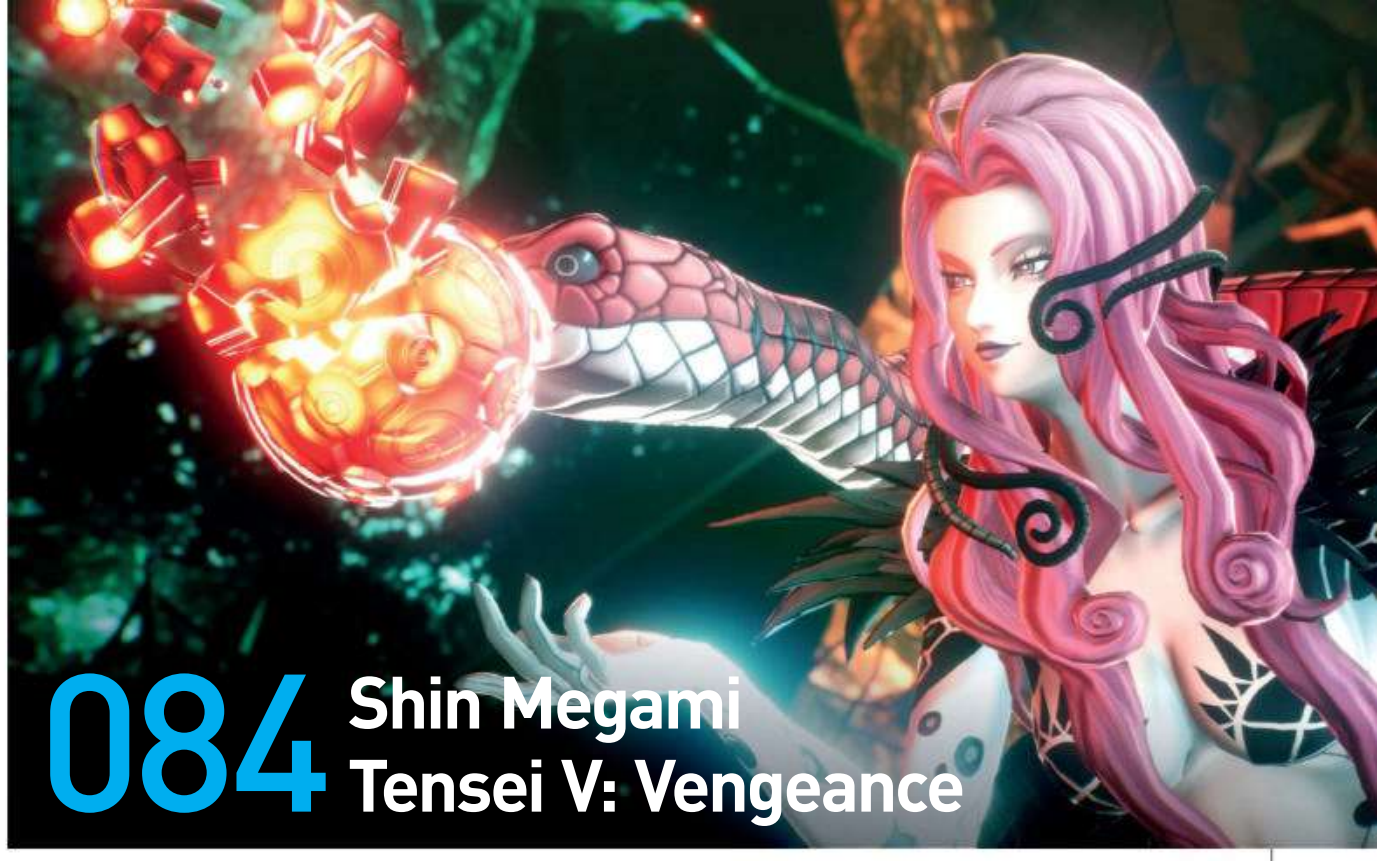

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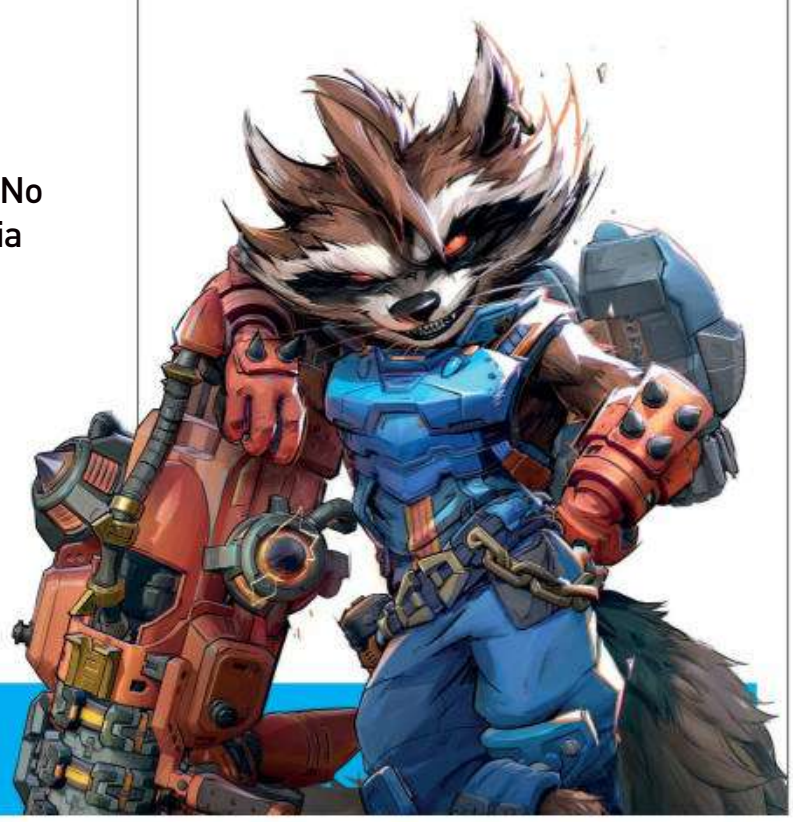

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Insider

Getting you closer to PlayStation's most exciting stories, people, and culture

"Blumhouse's announcement is one of the most exciting things to happen in indie horror gaming for years."

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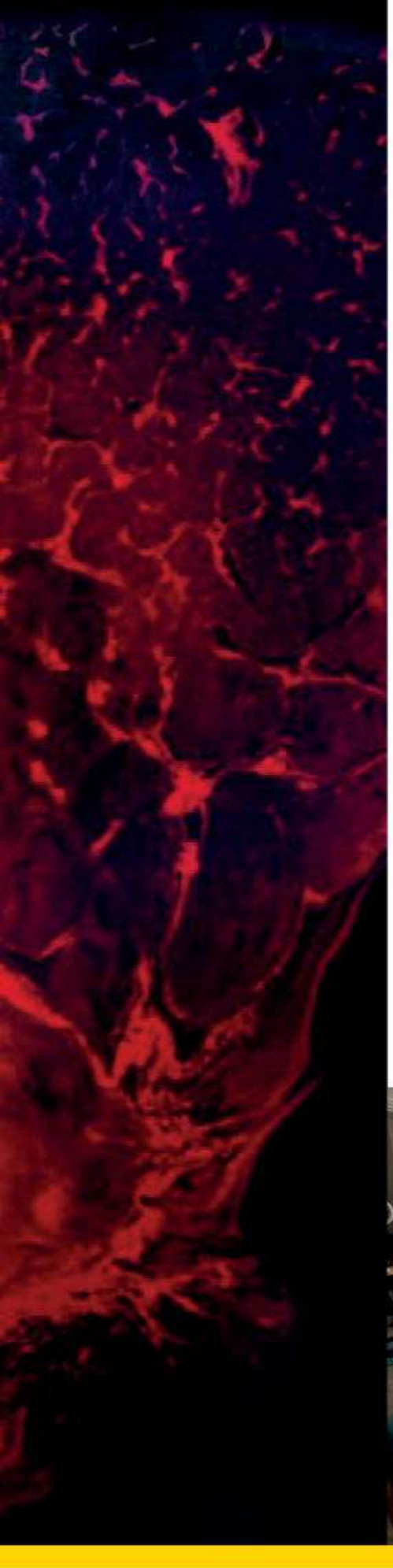
What are Cronenberg and Barlow working on? We have no idea but are sure it will be weird.



Blumhouse scares up horror talent

Backing indie game developers, the horror movie juggernaut makes an all-digital play

Blumhouse Films is nothing if not adaptable. The company, founded in 2002 by Jason Blum, started out in Hollywood producing films you've probably forgotten. After finding success in the horror genre, it branched out into other media, launching a fiction imprint in 2014 and a videogames division in 2023. At this year's Summer Game Fest, it announced the latter would be publishing six horror games from indie developers.

It makes sense for the games division to take the indie route; the parent company started out releasing movies like The Tooth Fairy and low-budget indie dramas before finally hitting upon a winning formula in 2009 when it released Paranormal Activity. That landmark film was originally shot for $15,000 with test screenings so positive they went back and shot a new ending for $200,000. It grossed $194 million at the box office.

15 years later Blumhouse is king of cinematic horror, with a well-known strategy: give up-and-coming independent film makers small (by Hollywood standards) budgets of a couple of million dollars, plus complete creative control, and let the chips fall where they may. This has led to a filmography as diverse in quality as it is in tone, but the key is, for every forgotten unscary dud (Like. Share. Follow.; The Exorcist: Believer; Amityville: The Awakening) there's a movie that explodes at the box office and was made for pennies compared to the competition. M3GAN, Five Nights At Freddy's, The Purge, and Happy Death Day all made multiple times their budget. And it looks like the company's approach is the same when it comes to games.

HOUSE OF HORRORS

Blumhouse Games' announcement is one of the most exciting things to happen in indie horror gaming for years. We know there's a huge market for indie horror games – YouTube and Twitch streamers pull in massive numbers showing off their terror – but the problem has often been that as soon as these experiences start to get really scary, the credits roll. PC players have a wealth of titles to choose from on Steam, Itch.io. and even virtual demo disc horror games, but they are often small-scale passion projects, with limited chance of jumping onto console.

> It announced it would be publishing six horror games from indie developers.

The Simulation is about blurring the line between virtual reality and, well, real reality.

Big publishers have shied away from releasing true horror games, with series like Resident Evil having their feet planted in both action and horror, because making a big-budget pure horror game is risky. Even names that were once huge, such as Silent Hill, have struggled to find a footing in the blockbuster world of big-time

Image: © Universal Studios

HERE'S FREDDY

Yes, we're excited about the games, but Blumhouse is still making movies too – some with their roots in videogames. The sequel to its adaptation of Five Nights At Freddy's is still in the works, and should be released in December 2025.

publishing. At the nexus between those two issues is where Blumhouse has spotted an opportunity. It's taking these small teams making esoteric horror that occasionally goes viral, and granting them (some of) the budget and marketing support of a multi-million dollar company to get their ideas out there. The money involved is a relatively small amount for Blumhouse, but it's massive for these teams.

This can already be seen from Blumhouse's first project, Fear The Spotlight, a PSX-inspired teen occult horror heading to PS5 and PS4 which we got to play at SGF. An early build of the game was briefly purchasable (and playable to completion) on PC in 2023 and garnered positive word-of-mouth. However, it was quickly taken down by husband-and-wife studio Cozy Game Pals, as a mysterious benefactor had swooped in to fund development of a console version, localisation to more languages, and, most importantly, additional gameplay elements. That benefactor was Blumhouse Games, and from our demo session, this support has resulted in a game so unnerving that even on a loud, busy, brightly lit show floor we were creeped out.

FRIGHT OR FIGHT

While this model of finding small teams with unique ideas seems to be core to Blumhouse Games' strategy (among the other games it's announced are Spanish-folklore-inspired Crisol: Theater Of Idols, cutesy farming sim murder mystery Grave Seasons, and game-within-a-game The Simulation), it is worth noting that as the years went on Blumhouse Films started working with bigger names in Hollywood to fund and produce passion projects that bigger studios were too risk-averse to place a bet on.

Established filmmakers like Joe Johnston (Captain America: The First Avenger), Leigh Whannell (Saw), Eli Roth (Hostel), David Gordon Green (Pineapple Express), Jordan Peele (Get Out), and M. Night Shyamalan (The Sixth Sense) have all taken smaller budgets from Blumhouse to make films with greater creative freedom, and that seems to be happening at the videogame division too. One of the creative leads on Spec Ops: The Line, Cory Davis, is teaming up with Nine Inch Nails guitarist Robin Finck for a futuristic first-person psychological horror called Sleep Awake, while Sam Barlow's studio, Half Mermaid (Her Story, Telling Lies, Immortality) is teaming up with the director of Possessor and Infinity Pool, Brandon Cronenberg (David Cronenberg's son, whose movies are just as weird as his dad's), to work on the mysterious Project C.

Horror fans love Blumhouse because even if a proportion of its movies aren't great (or even good sometimes), it is funding projects by aspiring creatives that just wouldn't be produced by anyone else. So while not all the games announced at SGF are revolutionary, the idea of having that potential for videogames excites us.

*** Fear The Spotlight will be the first release; news on the others to come.**

> Horror fans love Blumhouse because it's funding projects that just wouldn't be produced by anyone else.

Fear The Spotlight is a loving homage to the first PlayStation, swimmy vertices and all.

1

2

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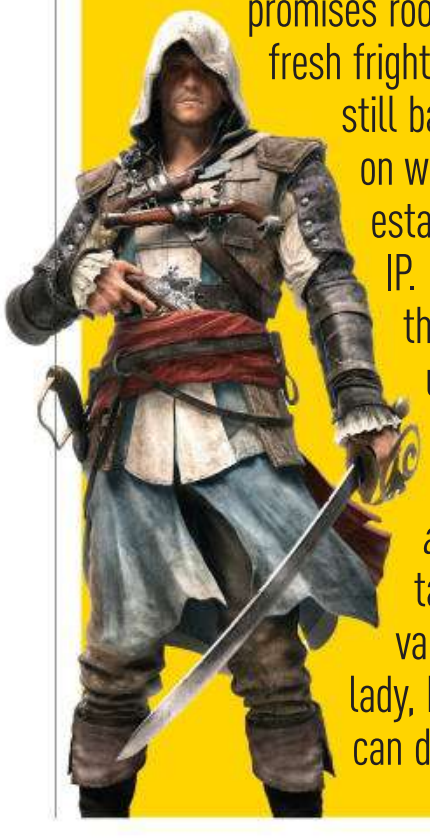
1 Crisol: Theater Of Idols invites us to the twisted isle of Tormentosa. We're expecting more sangre than sangria on this trip. **2** Low-poly can still look pretty grimy. And pretty scary. **3** Not the face! Sleep Awake is going to wake you with a jolt – as we'd expect from Cory Davis and Robin Finck. **4** The Simulation takes some cues from survival horror classics like Alone In The Dark, but features games within games, in horrifying meta fashion. **5** What if your farming sim got a little twisted? That's Grave Seasons. Forget Stardew's dark side stories; here you're dealing with a serial killer. (But what gifts do they like?)

BREAKING NEWS!
Also shambling back onto PlayStation is the Dead Rising Deluxe Remaster, due out on 19 September. If you're unfamiliar with that particular byline, photojournalist Frank West works to a tight deadline in this zombie slaying action-adventure.

News King
Jess plays town crier

There's no wondering why **Ubisoft** CEO Yves Guillemot has recently announced plans for multiple **Assassin's Creed** remakes. Wearying as the rapid revolutions of the nostalgia cycle are, remakes and remasters present a less risky business proposition given the current state of the industry. Everything old is to be made new again! (And then sold again.) **Capcom**, too, is coming off a recent string of successful remakes, though its next Resident Evil won't be a revisit. Led by **Resident Evil 7 Biohazard**'s director, **Koshi Nakanishi**, this in-development project promises room for fresh frights while still banking on well-established IP. I accept that it's unlikely to give us *another* tall vampire lady, but a girl can dream.



Finally, Fantasian!

Fantasian, the RPG from Final Fantasy's creator, is free from mobile exclusivity

As it debuted on mobile devices via Apple Arcade, microtransactions have never been part of Fantasian.

Ready for a refresh? Fantasian debuted exclusively on Apple Arcade for compatible mobile devices in 2021. As it was the latest RPG from Mistwalker, the studio led by Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, it was a big swing for the subscription service. Now the title is free from platform-based exclusivity, and heading to PS5 and PS4 this winter as Fantasian: Neo Dimension.

Fantasian was originally released in two parts; Neo Dimension presents those as one package, while introducing Japanese and English language voice acting for the first time. The project boasts a wealth of talent, with names familiar to any genre aficionado – for example, Final Fantasy music master Nobuo Uematsu composed 60 tracks in all, and Hironobu Sakaguchi himself is both writer and producer of the turn-based adventure.

The story centres on a white-haired, amnesiac chap named Leo who fights not only to regain his memories but also to save the realm from Vam The Malevolant. So far, so familiar – but though Fantasian is forged in the mould of classic RPGs, it has more than a few fresh spells to cast on players. For one, a core mechanic is designed to reduce the grind so central to many RPGs of yesteryear.

POCKET MONSTERS

Fantasian is set in a lushly realised world, in part thanks to the developers' unorthodox approach to building environments: every place you venture to is based on a 3D scan of a handcrafted diorama, totalling 150 in all. Not only does this lend the world a handmade touch, it creates a backdrop so compelling you don't really want your exploration to be interrupted every few paces by a random encounter.

Enter the Dimengeon, an interdimensional hold-all specifically for the monsters that would otherwise interrupt your adventuring to pick a fight with you. An optional mechanic, when turned on it automatically scoops up beasties as you poke around the world, but it can only hold so many at a time. When the Dimengeon is full, you've no option other than to clear it out through massive battles. Confronted by hordes of baddies, it helps, then, that many of your party's skills are trajectory-based and can be angled so they're able to take out multiple monsters at once.

Could Mistwalker's latest cast a spell for success on PlayStation, or has it already found its home on portable devices? We can only dream until this winter.

*** Fantasian: Neo Dimension is out this winter; the exact date to be announced.**

It wouldn't be Ace Attorney without a colourful cast of characters to cross-examine.

Raising the bar

Two Miles Edgeworths coming to PS4

Hold your objections – Miles Edgeworth is returning in two games of his own. Not only is Ace Attorney Investigations coming to PlayStation for the first time, but AAI2: Prosecutor's Gambit is making its official English-language debut.

Fans of the courtroom battler originals will enjoy these, as AAI's cases still revolve around finding evidence in order to pick apart contradictions in battles of wits. Edgeworth's mind works differently to Nick's, giving him his own twists on gameplay. This includes smashing two related clues together to 'deduce' a deeper meaning, and, introduced in the sequel, Logic Chess. Here, Edgeworth must tactically guide a branching conversation to effectively make the suspect spill their own beans. These two games also feature sections – now with redone character models – where Edgeworth and his pal actually run around little levels to uncover the truth behind the murders and conspiracies.

Spinoffs though they may be, consistent game design means these fit in with the rest of the series, and include some truly memorable cases of their own – not to mention it's great to get more of a window into Edgeworth's internal monologue.

As well as collecting together these two great games, there are quality-of-life tweaks like a history mode to check your dialogue history, and a story mode to auto-play the game. There's even a gallery containing the soundtrack, illustrations, character animations, and more. It's Miles ahead of the competition.

These games feature sections where Edgeworth and his pal actually run around little levels to uncover the truth.

* Ace Attorney Investigations Collection takes the PS4 stand on 6 September.

DEV ACCESS

Welcome to the Roughnecks

Blasting bugs and shooting the breeze with **Starship Troopers**' game lead Peter Maurice and star Casper Van Dien

Sometimes as a videogame journalist, you'll be asked to interview someone only tangentially related to a release. This happens a lot during movie junkets but also when Hollywood talent gets drafted in to lend their fame to a videogame. When this happens you can't help but pray that *they get it* – that they get videogames or they understand their role as part of the marketing to the public. Casper Van Dien *gets it*.

After meeting in a hotel lobby in LA during SGF, we find ourselves in a meeting room with just Starship Troopers: Extermination's game lead Peter Maurice and movie star Casper Van Dien, because the PR and marketing person has to go and watch Geoff Keighley's show. After joking about having no marketing people to supervise us, we get down to business, addressing the Helldivers 2-shaped elephant in the room. After all, reviews of the recent hit frequently likened it to the Starship Troopers films.

"Sucess in our genre is important," Maurice tells us, "Any success, because we're [both] horde-based shooters." He goes on to highlight the games' differences: Helldivers has four-player multiplayer, Extraction has 16 players, plus base building, *and* is "the official first-person shooter of Starship Troopers."

> **One of the things the team wanted to do was bring Johnny Rico back somehow.**

Maurice seems to acknowledge our suspicion that Helldivers' success is almost the best thing that could have happened while Extermination was in Early Access on PC. "What they're doing raises us all up, and it's important... [we're] now seeing Starship Troopers being talked about everywhere and... I think more and more people are starting to discover our game. Especially with the big announcements we're doing." We could see this during our time trying the playtest servers on PC before the scheduled press event, as the first public game we loaded into had a random fan roleplaying as a member of the series' Roughneck squad, cheering us on by saying that our bug murdering and injuries would guarantee citizenship.

It's hard to imagine that level of awareness of the Starship Troopers lore and willingness to roleplay would have been there were it not for the success of Helldivers 2, so we ask Maurice and Casper, with Extermination inevitably being compared to Helldivers and, more importantly, film director Paul Verhoeven's work, is the pressure on to deliver a worthy successor to the original film? Maurice tells us that one of the things the team wanted to do was bring the movie's most iconic character, Johnny Rico, back somehow.

VERHOEVEN OR HELL

Developer Offworld Industries did this by creating a single-player mode separate from the multiplayer, focussing on "old man Rico." While they are careful not to confirm whether you'll be playing as Rico, Van Dien does tell us, "I think I have more lines in this than I have in Starship Troopers 1 and 3." He goes on to explain, "It's meaty... How [Maurice and Offworld] has brought me into this is Johnny Rico has now got an arc. So he joined up [because of] a girl in the beginning [of the first movie] and he's the good soldier... [but] now as the general, some of the things that are more important to me are probably my troopers. And so we have that relationship, [and] there are parts of [the game] where I'm really stern and strict."

Peter Maurice adds that Offworld doesn't have a dedicated writer or narrative lead; when it came to crafting a story for Extermination the task fell mainly to him. He goes on to explain that while he isn't a professional writer, he does write in his spare time and he drew on his experience of studying psychology only to wind up in the game industry when it came to getting into the perspective of Rico (who, if you've seen the first film, didn't have to enlist to go to war). While this might not be the traditional way to write a script, Maurice tells us, "one of the compliments that almost made me cry was when [Casper] said, 'You know, Ed Neumeier [the writer of RoboCop and the first three Starship Trooper movies] would be proud of that."

The team won't comment on whether psychic powers will appear in later updates.

Finally, we want to know if there was any fear among the team of history repeating itself. When Starship Troopers was released in 1997 a large chunk of American media labeled it "pro-fascist" and "pro-war", seemingly not realising it was satire. Van Dien feels nowadays people get it, "I was surprised and shocked when it went over people's heads when it first came out. But, you know, this younger audience that comes up to me now... they're like 'I don't understand how people didn't get it.'" Well, we'll all get it later this year.

*** Would you like to know more? Wait till 11 October and you can play it yourself.**

1 Squashing bugs like it's 1997! 2 A different Starship Troopers game was released in 2005 – we predict that it will be splatted by Extermination. 3 And remember: Service Guarantees Citizenship.

Offworld Industries is aware that Starship Troopers: Extermination has to balance being fun to play with being a satire on war culture.

IN THE MOOD FOR...

Rebellion

Going underground or rising up, here's proof that no power is truly irresistible

1 THE SABOTEUR
Irishman Sean Devlin gets a nasty surprise when he emigrates to France shortly before the German occupation of 1940. Clearly he did Nazi that coming. Devlin involves himself in the fightback, erasing SS officers and carrying out raids, inspiring more Parisiens to arms in the process. Vive la Résistance!

2 FAR CRY 6
The dictator Antón Castillo needs taking down a peg or two, and it's your job to unite various disgruntled factions for the cause. The fictional island nation of Yara contains plenty of revolutionary spirit, plus an army-base-worth of firepower and vehicles to complete the overthrow.

3 FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE
Avalanche is a smart name for a resistance group, and the cell you join has an imposing leader in the shape of Barret Wallace. It's a pity, then, that his planning leaves a lot to be desired, with attacks on reactors a little too easy for the evil Shinra Corp to track and turn to its advantage.

4 XCOM 2
A tale of aliens and military dictators, with Earth's defence force XCOM reduced to a pocketful of fighters plus a mobile command centre. As ever in Firaxis' series, the xenomorphs have the best gear and sacrifices will be made, but get your tactics right and you'll have a chance.

5 PIKUNIKU
Everything looks sunny in this oddball platformer, but sinister schemes simmer under the pure blue skies. Piku starts to peel back the shiny façade and eventually joins an underground movement. Has the leggy blob got what it takes to send devious tycoon Mr Sunshine packing? You bet.

6 BEYOND GOOD & EVIL
A combo of murderous aliens and military dictators is spoiling life for photojournalist Jade and her porcine friend Pey'j. Fortunately, her camera is the ideal tool for opening people's eyes to the truth, and she's not bad in a fight either. Jade infiltrates enemy bases, snapping necks and pictures in equal measure.

7 DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN
Androids have feelings too, and those may stretch to rebelliousness. The outcome of your uprising is far from certain, however, with the fates of the three main characters and society itself dependent on the choices you make. No-one said fighting for your rights was easy.

8 WE. THE REVOLUTION
France again, this time for the 18th century's big upheaval. But in this thoughtful indie you play a judge tasked with figuring out what counts as justice in tumultuous times. Make unpopular decisions and you may become an enemy of the people. Chop chop.

9 STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR
Facing one of science fiction's most notorious empires, we know well by now that a Jedi only has two options – to slide to the dark side or use the force to spark change from the bottom up. Cal Kestis selects the latter and lightsabers his way through stormtroopers to give Vader's mob a poke in the eye.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Suikoden
Konami's classic RPG asks you to form an army against your own country, the Scarlet Moon Empire, once you see it for what it really is.

Freedom Fighters
The title says it all really. Battle for liberty on the streets of New York against a Soviet invasion in this third-person squad shooter.

Red Faction: Guerrilla
Guerrilla warfare isn't the only hallmark of rebellion – strike back against the world itself with excellent destruction mechanics.

Did we miss your favourite rebellion? Got an In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at **twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag**

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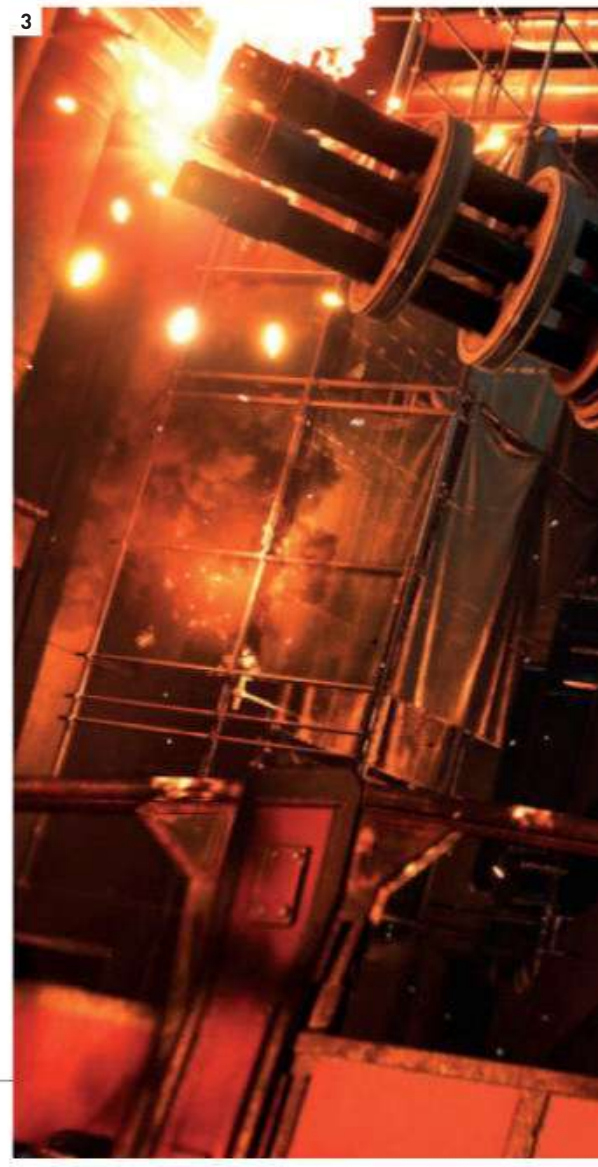

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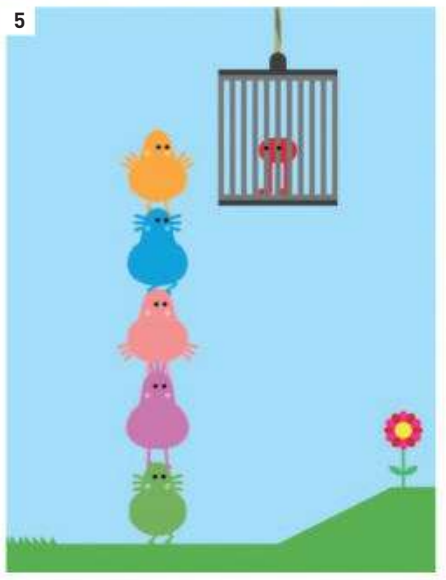

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"NO-ONE SAID FIGHTING FOR YOUR RIGHTS WAS EASY."

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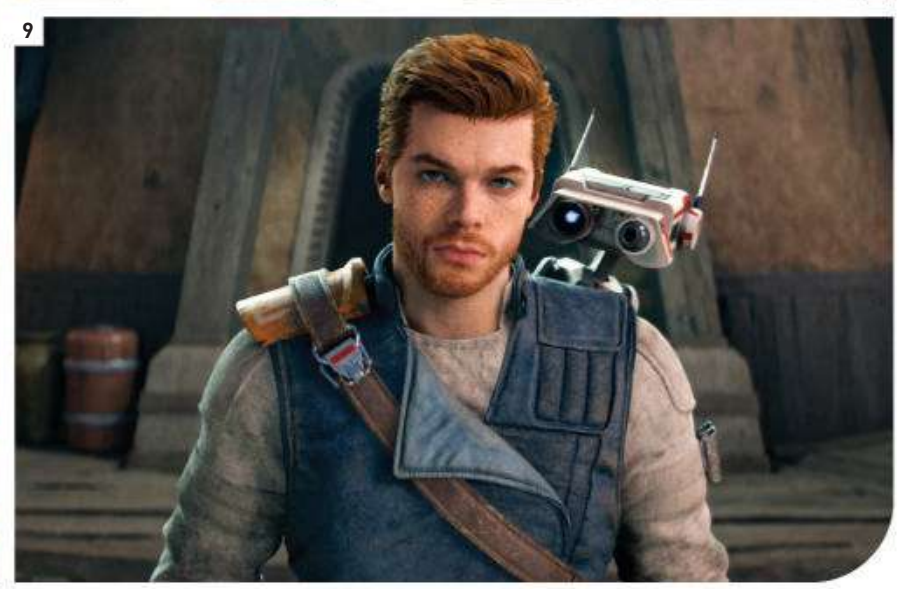

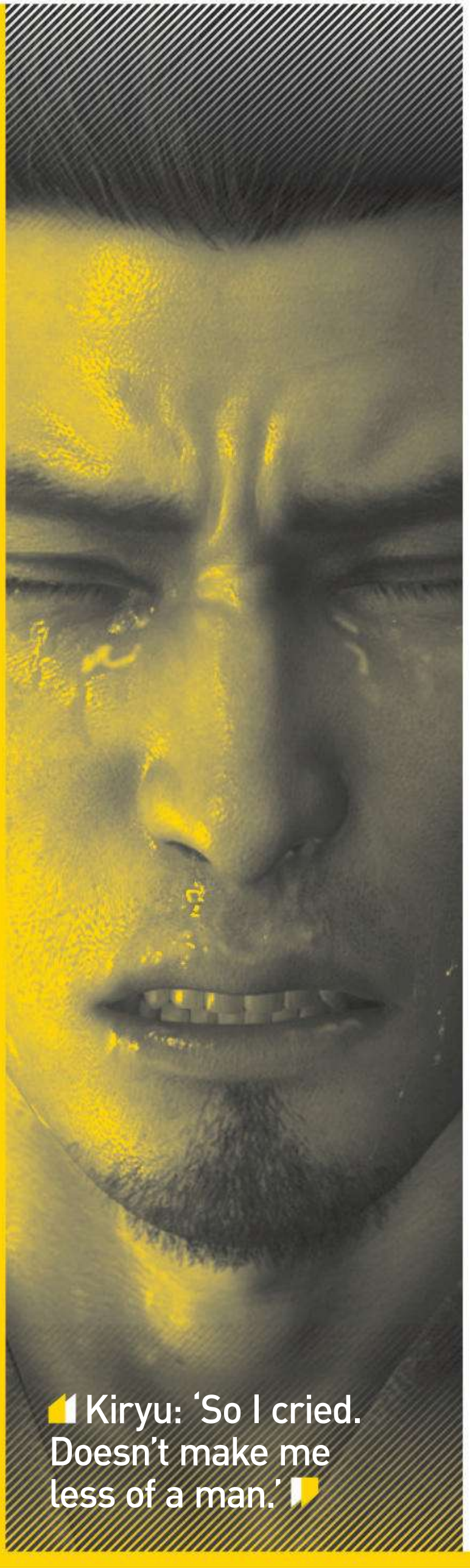

OPINION

“SOMETIMES, YOU JUST NEED TO LET THE LEGENDARY DRAGONS SHED A TEAR.”

Like A Dragon shines brightest when deconstructing masculinity

WRITER BIO
Ashley Schofield picked up Yakuza 0 on sale in 2020, and has felt strongly towards these hardened yet kind criminals ever since.

On the surface, the stone-faced protagonists of the Like A Dragon series appear to be strength first, emotions later. Yet across its near 20-year run, the series has been at its best when deconstructing the preconceived notions of hardened masculinity that its cast evokes at first glance, revealing the burning, broken hearts that lie beneath.

This is woven into the fabric of the series, with the second game seeing Kazuma Kiryu watch a particularly emotional video tape and expound to himself: “So I cried. Doesn’t make me less of a man.” As the series has continued, the writers’ willingness to break through their characters’ emotional walls has increased noticeably. Premier protagonist Kiryu is a man who typically reserves any emotional fervency for only the most extreme of circumstances, such as the deaths of those close to him, while series successor Ichiban Kasuga wears his heart on his sleeve as a driving character trait. While Kasuga has not replaced Kiryu outright, his emotionality has bled into and added depth to Kiryu’s own character.

TEARFUL FINALES

Yakuza: Like A Dragon, Gaiden, and Infinite Wealth have one powerful aspect in common: emotional peaks defined by their protagonists collapsing into sobs – not out of sadness, but love, forgiveness, and hope.

Kiryu’s last words to Ebina – an apology to not just the man he kneels over, but everyone he’s hurt.

Spoilers ahead!

As Yakuza: Like A Dragon ends, Kasuga pleads with his fallen brother Masato to turn over a new leaf. Desperate not to lose any more of his family, Kasuga tells him, “Whether you like it or not, I see you as my brother.” Even knowing the despicable path Masato has followed, Kasuga still wants to give him the love he’s been missing, placing familial love over being the bigger man.

Kiryu follows Kasuga’s lead in Gaiden, upon seeing his adopted children for the first time in years after faking his death – albeit through a tablet screen. Otherwise stoic, here the big man bursts into tears, overwhelmed with love, as the children tell him how they’re growing into well-rounded people – even his grandchild Haruto, who he only knew as a baby. He weeps, “Even without me, they have no trouble standing on their own two feet.”

In Infinite Wealth, Kiryu’s final arc, the dragon kneels over Ebina – the yakuza captain who despises the yakuza – and softly embraces him. In another game, the protagonist might stand proudly over their defeated opponent, but the dragons are different. Kiryu knows that Ebina’s hatred stems from the instability that resulted when Kiryu left the Tojo clan, and here he confronts his own culpability for Ebina’s tainted upbringing.

He’s forced to approach his failures as a father too – to his adopted children and the clan as a whole – in leaving them to suffer without him. In his final words to Ebina, and everyone his actions have affected, he apologises: “I know it won’t make up for any of this, but I am sorry. Forgive me.” Kiryu grows past his fatal flaw; realising that being the most formidable man in Kamurocho did not save everyone close to him, he abandons his exile and chooses to thrive alongside his loved ones. The series’ core message is loud and clear: nothing proves a man’s strength like choosing love, despite it all.

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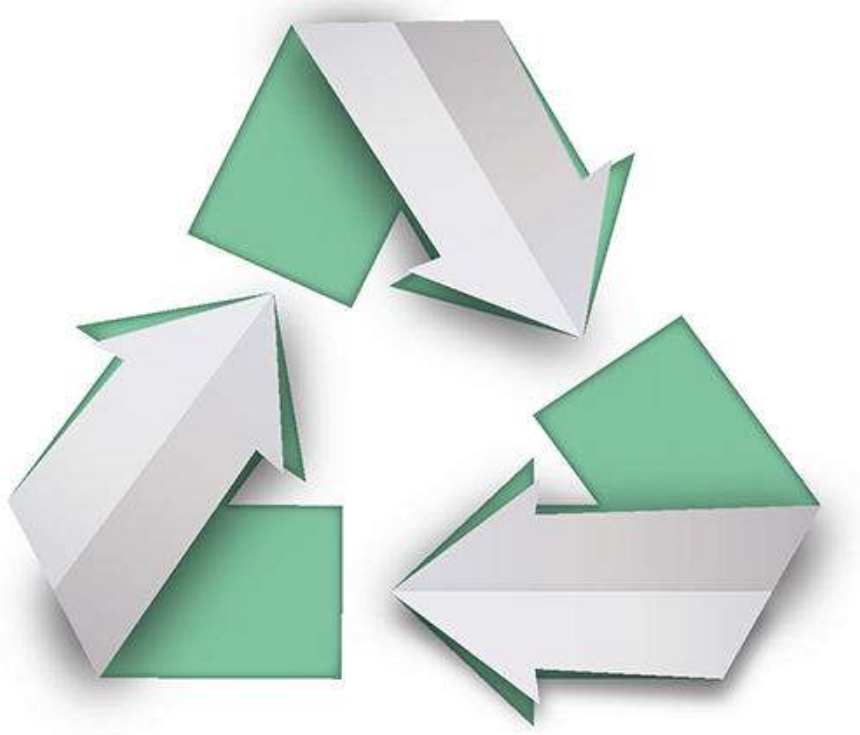

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OPINION

"PUNISHING COMBAT DOESN'T NEED TO BE SET AGAINST A BLEAK BACKDROP."

Rise Of The Ronin proves it's possible for soulslikes to be optimistic

WRITER BIO
James Daly is a writer, editor, and producer here at Future. A huge fan of RPGs, 2024 has been a good year for him. He loves a challenge!

The alluring elements of a good soulslike are well documented at this point. Challenging combat, a variety of builds, and cryptic side-quests typify FromSoftware's action RPGs, and their imitators, or titles inspired by them, respect this formula. From Lies Of P to Dead Cells, there's no shortage of bleak worlds inhabited by punishing enemies and offering morally questionable outcomes.

However, one soulslike has deviated slightly from the path, and the result is just what I've been clamouring for.

In Rise Of The Ronin, Team Ninja reimagines the final years of Japan's Edo Period during the mid-19th century, serving up a compelling blend of roleplaying and brutality. As you progress, you are met with countless enemies and quirky side-characters in a gorgeous open-world environment (ignore the rage-baiting memes, this thing is beautiful in action), all producing a familiar sensation for Hidetaka Miyazaki enthusiasts.

A HAPPIER SOULSLIKE

However, there's one area where the developer has broken away from the pack, and it's the in-game world's tone. Rise Of The Ronin, put simply, isn't overwhelmingly depressing. Or, at least, it doesn't have to be. Sure, there's death everywhere (it's wartime after all), but there's no shortage of optimism despite this. Take lead supporting character Sakamoto Ryoma, for example. This companion, based on a real person, is often on hand to shine a rosy light in darker moments. Or consider the many cats lounging throughout the game's locations, all available for a quick cuddle.

While punishing, Rise Of The Ronin is optimistic, asking you to resolve the story as you see fit.

Then there are the many happy endings available for the people you meet, as long as you put the work in. The game's a soulslike, so you may not always figure out what needs to be done too quickly. Having said that, if you're unhappy with any results, you can replay them through an in-game option and see alternate timelines to the main ending you get (there are several). You can also make multiple save files within one playthrough, enabling you to undo any errors. (You might be feeling furious at that, but let it go.)

Now, I'm not criticising FromSoft here because I respect the studio's artistic vision when it comes to lore and settings. I no longer question the poisonous swamps, the Dragonrot, or the need for Micolash to be such a gifted runner, but that doesn't mean I don't crave a place where life can bloom free of any supernatural afflictions. Nihilism is all well and good, but what's wrong with having a world that's actually worth fighting for instead of going hollow in? I mean, I've played through Elden Ring nine times by this point and I've never really agreed with Melina's speech about how there's still beauty in the Lands Between. I'm guessing the staff at Team Ninja agree with me because they've fashioned a different vibe.

Rise Of The Ronin is optimistic, asking you to resolve the story as you see fit. It lets you pick who you battle or co-operate with, who you spend time with, and who you believe in. It even has romance options that lead to heartwarming moments. Above all, it gives you every opportunity to make a new dawn worth waking up to, and that's something so few soulslikes choose to do.

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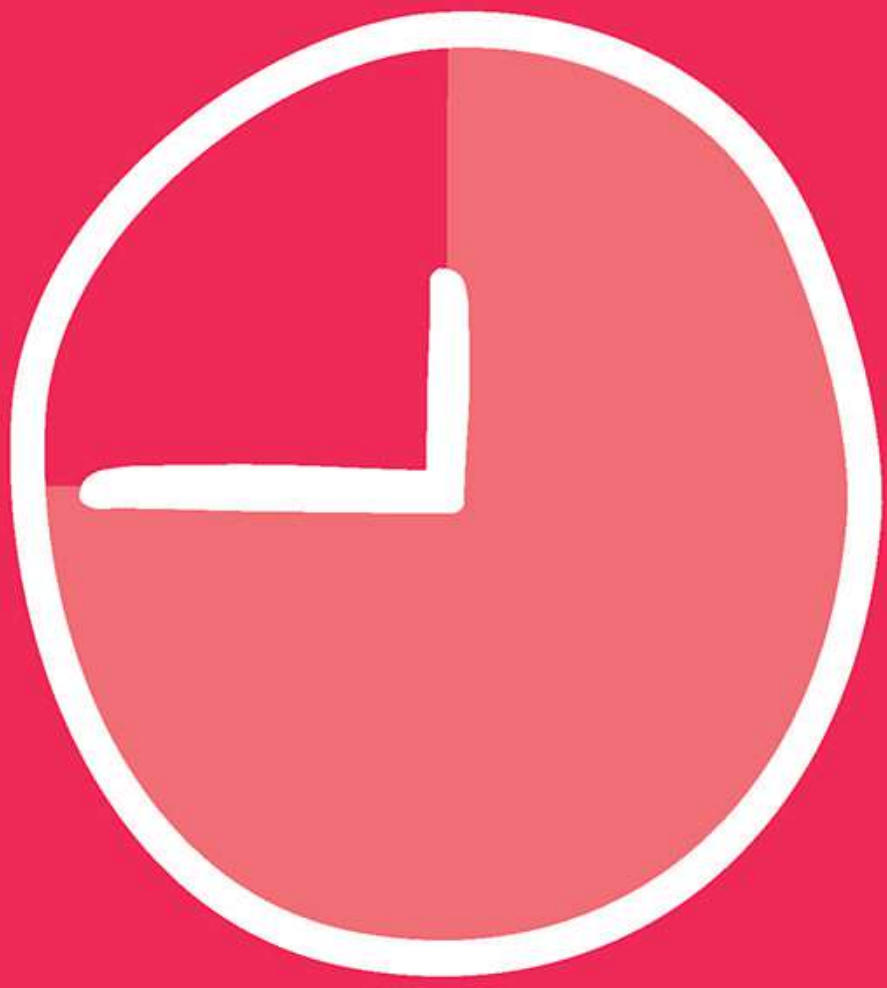

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THE HOT 50

50-01

PlayStation's next wave of hits is on the way, from blockbuster sequels to the brand-new – these are the 50 hottest games to look out for, coming to your PS5, PS4, and PSVR2!

50

DELTA FORCE: HAWK OPS

Teaching an old hawk new tricks

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** TIMI STUDIO GROUP / **DEV** TEAM JADE / **PLAYERS** MULTI

Never heard of Delta Force? Then you, like us, weren't a big PC gamer in the late '90s. Revolutionary at the time due to huge 3D environments that pushed what was possible on the platform, that ambition meant it never had much of a footprint on console. By the time it did make the leap, bigger series like Call Of Duty and Battlefield had already shaped what console shooters could be. But now Delta Force is back courtesy of Tencent and Team Jade, which developed Call Of Duty Mobile.

With impressive visuals, detailed gun models, and realistic sound design the game feels modern and at home on PlayStation. Free-to-play, it's a big package, though one indicative of the demands placed on shooters that want to make it big in the current gaming landscape.

HAVOC AND HAZARDS

Hawk Ops' three game modes are all balanced differently and seem to be trying to recreate the magic of different aspects of the classic games. Havoc Warfare makes up the traditional multiplayer chunk of Hawk Ops (and is a little like Battlefield's Conquest modes). Here you'll pick operators from the usual suspects of Assault, Recon, Medic, and Technician, plus a fifth class unrevealed at the time of our demo, climb into vehicles on big maps in high-player-count matches, and fight in tug-of-war-style encounters against another team. This game mode definitely captures the scale of the original voxel-based series. Forced to play only with bots during our demo sessions, which limits what we can truly say about game balance, it's impressive to see two big teams fighting over a small plot of land in chaotic combat.

The second game mode is an extraction shooter called Hazard Operations. Here teams of three (although we played solo) drop into open world maps along with rival teams and plenty of AI enemies and have to complete different missions.

The two multiplayer modes are set slightly in the future while the story mode is grounded in the real-life events of 1993.

"THE CAMPAIGN TIES IN TO RIDLEY SCOTT'S 2001 MOVIE BLACK HAWK DOWN."

Meta-progression seems to be very fleshed out, with your base home to characters who give you specific missions to complete with some light narrative behind them, before you're dropped into these regions to compete over completing objectives.

Like Call Of Duty: Warzone, Hazard Operations has you bring in your own weapons that you can lose or leave behind if you find something better in the field. The mode does a great job of capturing the danger and 'realism' of those early Delta Force games; death comes quickly and we have to manage bleeding and injuries with a plethora of health and armour items.

One thing we can say for certain is that the guns feel appropriately dangerous.

GREAT SCOTT

With two modes covering two of the most lucrative types of online shooter, what's left? A campaign tying in to Ridley Scott's 2001 movie Black Hawk Down, of course. Exclusive to consoles and PC, it centres on the real-life events of the Battle Of Mogadishu in 1993. Its presence here is another throwback to the Delta Force of old, specifically Delta Force: Black Hawk Down, which came to PS2 in 2005. This portion of the game is unique in that it runs in Unreal Engine 5, whereas the multiplayer modes use a modified revision of the customised engine used for Call Of Duty Mobile.

Delta Force: Hawk Ops' scale is admirable, as is Team Jade's plan for extensive post-launch support. Its splintered modes are an unusual approach, though perhaps one that makes a lot of sense for a modern shooter that needs to pull players in for frequent matches. The problem in 2024 is going to be the same as the one it faced in the '00s – whether it can dethrone Call Of Duty.

A dense and populated city like Kowlong is a contrast to the isolated environments of most horror games.

49

SLITTERHEAD

Nomad soul-jack

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 8 NOV **/ PUB** BOKEH GAME STUDIO **/ DEV** BOKEH GAME STUDIO **/ PLAYERS** 1

You'd expect a certain kind of survival horror from a studio whose founding members have Silent Hill and Forbidden Siren on their resumés. Slitterhead is similar up to a point, in Akira Yamaoka's unnerving sound design, the grotesque design of the monsters that disguise themselves as humans, and even one early homage to sightjacking. However, it quickly becomes clear that it's very different in scope and tone – and rather reminiscent of Quantic Dream's The Nomad Soul.

Your protagonist is an amnesiac lacking not only memories but also a body. Unable to amble around on their own two feet, they instead have the power to possess people. You can ping between bodies to reach otherwise-inaccessible places or bypass obstructions – this becomes essential for surviving any gory encounter with a slitterhead, a properly gnarly beastie that can kill you where you stand in a number of winceworthy ways. Still, if the host you possessed dies, you can hop into another bystander and continue legging it. (That said, get 'killed' three times and it's Game Over.)

While it becomes apparent in a darkly comical way that most of the humans are pretty disposable, there are also special humans called 'rarities' who resonate strongly with your mysterious possessing entity and are able to fight back, with one memorable standout being a girl who grows Wolverine-like claws.

Steering this action girl, Slitterhead becomes less about running away and more about pulse-pounding combat – albeit with a fair bit of jank and a tricky parry system. Yet the atmosphere of this neon-lit Kowloon-inspired location, as you travel through street markets and mahjong parlours, makes this game as intoxicating as it is bizarre.

48

TALES OF THE SHIRE: A THE LORD OF THE RINGS GAME

What about second breakfast?

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 2024 **/ PUB** TAKE-TWO INTERACTIVE
DEV WETA WORKSHOP **/ PLAYERS** 1

Given how much hobbits love their food, it's no surprise that cooking is the main activity in Weta Workshop's take on the cosy life sim. That's not to say that it lacks complexity – the inputs are fairly rudimentary but if you want a higher rating, you'll want to get the final product to hit the sweet spot between smooth and chunky or crisp and tender. Using specific ingredients can also change a dish's flavour. But traipsing back to a quest-giver is less delectable, especially as NPCs can change their location throughout the day. Still, there's an irresistible charm here, from the way a flock of birds will point you in the right direction to how hobbits skip rather than run.

When cooking, a chart shows where your dish falls on the smooth/chunky and crisp/tender axes – specific ingredients make it sweeter or spicier too.

47

TIDES OF TOMORROW

Player choice is more than a drop in the ocean

FORMAT TBC **/ ETA** TBC **/ PUB** DEEP SILVER
DEV DIGIXART **/ PLAYERS** 1, ONLINE FUNCTIONALITY

When allowed a peek at which narrative choices our friends pick, we all relish the opportunity to judge them. ('You didn't water your plant *once* during Life Is Strange?') Now Road 96's dev is employing the community's diverging decisions to augment its next narrative adventure with a parallel universe spin.

Amid the roiling waves of ocean planet Elynd, you play as a chancer getting a little help from the other side. Contending with tensions that are rising thanks to a lethal phenomenon that threatens to plasticise all living matter, echoes of your pals' choices will clue you into what course you should set through these troubled waters. You could set sail in search of a cure, or simply focus on keeping your own head above water – but whatever you pick is bound to have a ripple effect.

Being able to see the decisions your friends have made while playing could well affect your own choices. Though who would want to be a *total* copycat?

Everyone's fave photographer Max is torn between two timelines – can she solve this murder mystery before it tears Caledon University community apart?

46

LIFE IS STRANGE: DOUBLE EXPOSURE

Spot the difference

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** 29 OCT **/ PUB** SQUARE ENIX
DEV DECK NINE GAMES **/ PLAYERS** 1

Superpowered teen protagonist Max Caulfield is back, voiced by Hannah Telle once more, in a new Life Is Strange game *not* developed by Don't Nod Entertainment. Square Enix owns the rights to this teen drama series, and Deck Nine has been steering the ship development-wise since 2021's emotional rollercoaster Life Is Strange: True Colors.

Double Exposure takes place years after the first game. At the end of that story, Max made an impossible choice, with consequences so traumatic she vowed never to use her time rewinding powers again. When this game starts, she's become photographer-in-residence at Caledon University – but time is running out and tragedy threatens to strike again.

GHOSTING THE PAST

One night, Max finds the body of her close friend Safi lying in the snow. With no weapon, no footprints, and almost no leads to be found at the scene of the crime, it's far from a straightforward case – but Max, awakening to a strange new ability, is far from an average investigator. Instead of reeling time backwards, Max can now peek into an alternate timeline – one where Safi is alive and well but nowhere near out of the woods. By hopping between now and then, Max can gather clues and stop Safi's killer before they leave another body out in the cold in either timeline. Every character is affected differently by Safi's fate, essentially offering a cast that doubles up on characterisation while also introducing a veritable yarn ball of narrative threads to untangle.

As you may have already guessed, choice still plays a major role in this chapter-based sequel. For instance, in one timeline Safi teases Max about the picture of the 'blue-haired girl' she keeps in her wallet, and it's up to you to explain just what she meant to you (we're not crying, *you're* crying). This is a narratively ambitious step up for the series, and we're intrigued to see how Max's investigation, ahem, develops.

45

CONCORD

We've got Guardians Of The Galaxy at home...

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 23 AUG **/ PUB** SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
DEV FIREWALK STUDIOS **/ PLAYERS** ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

Not too long ago Sony announced to investors its plans to launch at least ten new live service games before March 2026. Presumably this debut release from Firewalk Studios (a dev Sony scooped up last year) is one of those titles, hoping to walk among the stars of laser-focussed fandom and daily login bonuses.

This science-fantasy shooter introduces you to the crew of the Northstar, a ragtag team of 'Freegunners' who bolt around arenas paying only lip service to the pull of gravity. There will be a selection of 16 characters at launch, from augmented snipers to big robots and even fire-flinging mystics. All are eager to charge head-first into any one of six different 5v5 PvP modes launching this August.

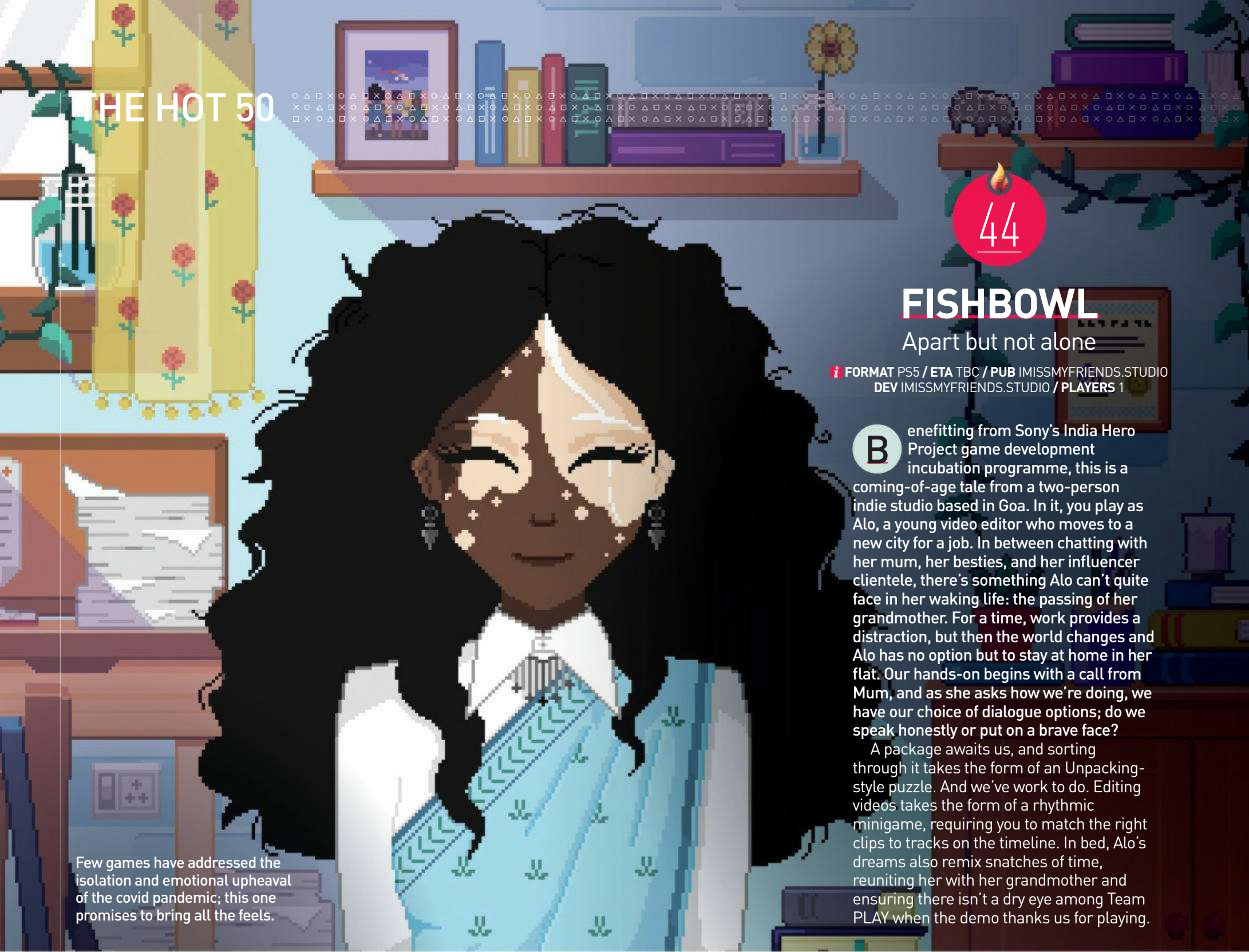
> "EVERY WEEK A NEW CINEMATIC VIGNETTE WILL DEBUT IN-GAME."

GUNNING WILD

Concord employs the usual online multiplayer FPS tactics to keep you coming back, such as regular challenges, additional maps, and fresh Freegunners released at a regular clip, but that's far from all it's offering. In addition to solid shooting spiced up by a wealth of character-specific abilities, Concord is banking *a lot* on its narrative.

Everybody loves a heist – or at least the part where a crack team of con artists band together when the latest job inevitably goes awry. If the latest cinematic trailer is anything to go by, that's something Firewalk Studios knows well. So, beyond striking character designs (we want to know *so much more* about funky fungus fighter Lark, for a start), and action that looks genuinely lively, Firewalk is investing in the Northstar's crew. Every week a new cinematic vignette will debut in-game, demonstrating the trials and tribulations of life on board. It remains to be seen whether this hero shooter can rise above predictable quips and by-the-book characterisation, but it might just surprise us. It's a big galaxy; who knows what could happen?

While we're not yet endeared to Concord's personality, it may eventually manage to win us over – especially with its slick, gravity-defying shooting.



44

FISHBOWL

Apart but not alone

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** TBC **/ PUB** IMISSMYFRIENDS.STUDIO
DEV IMISSMYFRIENDS.STUDIO **/ PLAYERS** 1

Benefitting from Sony's India Hero Project game development incubation programme, this is a coming-of-age tale from a two-person indie studio based in Goa. In it, you play as Alo, a young video editor who moves to a new city for a job. In between chatting with her mum, her besties, and her influencer clientele, there's something Alo can't quite face in her waking life: the passing of her grandmother. For a time, work provides a distraction, but then the world changes and Alo has no option but to stay at home in her flat. Our hands-on begins with a call from Mum, and as she asks how we're doing, we have our choice of dialogue options; do we speak honestly or put on a brave face?

A package awaits us, and sorting through it takes the form of an Unpacking-style puzzle. And we've work to do. Editing videos takes the form of a rhythmic minigame, requiring you to match the right clips to tracks on the timeline. In bed, Alo's dreams also remix snatches of time, reuniting her with her grandmother and ensuring there isn't a dry eye among Team PLAY when the demo thanks us for playing.

Few games have addressed the isolation and emotional upheaval of the covid pandemic; this one promises to bring all the feels.

43

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VII

Build your kingdom anew

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** 2025 **/ PUB** 2K
DEV FIRAXIS GAMES **/ PLAYERS** TBC

Videogame titans rise, fall, and rise again. It's been five years since the last entry in this strategy series came to PlayStation, and the next chapter has just been announced. Cultivate your own little corner of humanity, build cities and develop tech, then point your people at other civilisations in the hope either of scoring allies or of hoovering up the territory of your foes. Do you imitate history, possibly repeating the mistakes of the past? Do you forge ahead with your own historical fanfic in mind, finding fresh pitfalls along the way? Or do you go in with no plan and see what happens? The choice is yours.

So far specific details on what's in the latest game are scanty; we'd like to see some new civilisations – how about dropping Myanmar into the mix, Firaxis?

42

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

Wearing many Archetypes

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** 11 OCT **/ PUB** SEGA
DEV ATLUS STUDIO ZERO **/ PLAYERS** 1

The studio behind the massively popular Persona series is now daydreaming of a fresh high-fantasy RPG. The land's prince is struck down by twisted magic, and vanishingly few days remain before the curse completely overtakes him. You play as an outcast who puts themself forward to rule in his place – because, in a surprising twist, the kingdom is an absolute democracy so in theory *anyone* can nominate themself to rule, though not all candidates have to battle against the same discrimination as you and your comrades. Speaking of whom, you can mix and match abilities in combat across 40 different 'archetypes' (essentially jobs or classes you unlock by befriending a variety of characters) to send the opposition packing. It's a long way to the top, but you're not doing it alone.

While Euchronia is called a united kingdom, it's really not. Bringing the various peoples together is your job, along with curing the prince of his curse.

For better or worse, Kunitsu-Gami feels like an experimental PS2 game.

41

KUNITSU-GAMI: PATH OF THE GODDESS

Exorcism on the dancefloor

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** OUT NOW **/ PUB** CAPCOM **/ DEV** CAPCOM **/ PLAYERS** 1

Described by Capcom as a "Japanese-inspired, single-player kagura action strategy game" (kagura is a traditional type of dance-theatre), Kunitsu-Gami can more accurately be explained as something like a single-player MOBA crossed with tower defence… where the tower is slowly moving through discrete maps. It's a lot to get used to.

Your silent protagonist is tasked with protecting a goddess as she performs a kagura dance ritual which cleanses spirits. Each mission is split into a day/night cycle; while the sun is up you can run around the cursed villages to cleanse locals who have been calcified in gross-looking rot. Saved, they're happy to help – meaning you can assign them jobs like spearman or archer to help defend the goddess come sundown.

FIGHT NIGHT

When night falls, yokai-like spirits called Seethe attack through the level's torii gates, traditional arches that stand outside Japanese shrines. Acting like checkpoints, they're where the goddess' path ultimately leads, meaning the further she dances, the closer she gets to danger. Killing Seethe and cleansing the area earns a currency used to switch villagers' jobs, but is also needed to carve out a literal path for the goddess to follow.

The challenge comes from juggling improving your villagers so they can provide a solid defence while also making progress. You can nudge the balance by issuing tactical orders to the villagers, and by jumping into the fray yourself. Action is simple and streamlined, with normal and heavy attacks making for simple combos that can turn the tide of a night dramatically.

Which is all to say Kunitsu-Gami is a game that evolves the more you refine your tactics, and the more you get used to the unique cadence of gameplay. Special levels, from frequent boss battles to clashes on boats and even one that has us unable to hack and slash ourselves, keep things fresh. With a melancholy and beautiful vibe and gorgeous diorama-like visuals, these first steps to the dance have us wanting to take another turn on the floor. Check back next issue – the game will be out just after this one and we'll have our full thoughts.

40

CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

Fight a god before age gets you

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** TBC **/ PUB** KEPLER INTERACTIVE
DEV SANDFALL INTERACTIVE **/ PLAYERS** 1

Sandfall Interactive's debut game introduces the Paintress, the tallest woman to beat since Resident Evil Village's Lady Dimitrescu. Each year the Paintress paints a number, and each year every human of that age dies. You'll follow a party on a hopeless mission to what looks like a new dimension to fight their way through to stop the murderous wannabe Monet.

While the 'let's use the power of friendship to kill God' story doesn't seem all too special, Clair Obscur's mix of turn-based and real-time combat plus cool character work has a fluidity reminiscent of Final Fantasy XVI, and it's always a pleasant surprise to see a studio beyond the usual suspects tackling a dramatic party RPG.

39

NEW WORLD: AETERNUM

An old world made new

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 15 OCT **/ PUB** AMAZON GAMES
DEV AMAZON GAMES **/ PLAYERS** MULTI

Even for Amazon Games, developing an MMORPG as its debut was ambitious, and New World – a colonial-themed mix of crafting, survival, and combat – had serious growing pains when it was released on PC in 2021. Now Amazon wants to deliver a version with specific quality-of-life fixes for the console players it's inviting to Aeternum. If you've lost years of your life to FFXIV, don't worry, New World can be enjoyed as a far more casual experience.

38

UNBEATABLE

Music is a crime

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 2025 **/ PUB** PLAYSTACK
DEV D-CELL GAMES **/ PLAYERS** 1

The pitch for this one is pretty strong: Unbeatable is a rhythm game set in a world where music is illegal. So, as pink-haired lead character Beat you commit crimes. By making said music. And apparently punching some cops to the beat. Motionless images definitely don't do this one justice; Unbeatable combines anime-style visuals and vibrancy with some very solid pop bops for you to beat up monsters to. There is both a campaign and a separate arcade mode, so this could be the one that has it all. And that's music to our ears.

37

DYNASTY WARRIORS ORIGINS

Now with more warriors!

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 2025 **/ PUB** KOEI TECMO
DEV OMEGA FORCE **/ PLAYERS** 1

Judging by the title, Omega Force is returning to its roots. About time too; an empty open world and lack of multiplayer modes made its last game, Dynasty Warriors 9, grindy and difficult to enjoy. Details are limited – all we've really had is a short glimpse of the new, nameless protagonist and the real star of the show, the combat. Fortunately that looks brilliant.

You'll eventually have a party of six, with three going into battle at a time.

36

UNKNOWN 9: THE AWAKENING

Taking a ghost to a gun fight

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** AUTUMN 2024
PUB BANDAI NAMCO
DEV REFLECTOR ENTERTAINMENT **/ PLAYERS** 1

With locations to rival those in Uncharted and a story that makes us think of Assassin's Creed with a dash of magic, Unknown 9 raises our expectations. As Haroona, you try to bring the man who killed your mentor to justice and thwart a secret society, using powers that let you body-hop between enemies. It's not your regular combat mechanic, and Haroona isn't your regular hero, making us doubly invested.

35

LOVE ETERNAL

Turn your frown upside down

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 2025 **/ PUB** YSBRYD GAMES
DEV BRLKA **/ PLAYERS** 1

Was precision platformer Celeste too uplifting for you, and did it leave you feeling like it didn't feature nearly enough deadly spikes on which to meet your end? Then keep an eye on Love Eternal, a side-scrolling platformer with a dash of cosmic horror. Protagonist Maya has been imprisoned by a god, and now keeps seeing distorted versions of her family as well as herself as she searches for a way out. Love Eternal looks difficult and disturbing, and we love how even a platformer can excel at giving you the creeps.

34

SLAY THE PRINCESS

Sounds simple enough

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** AUTUMN 2024
PUB SERENITY FORGE
DEV BLACK TABBY GAMES **/ PLAYERS** 1

Should the title be unclear, narrator Jonathan Sims of podcast The Magnus Archives fame lays out your task: you need to slay the princess. If you don't, the world will end. Of course, it's never that easy; not only does the princess fight back, you're trapped in a time loop with her. This is a twisted fairytale with seriously strong writing, deservedly making its way to PlayStation at long last.

What's a hardened fighter doing sipping tea here? Warrior Alta seems just as confused as we are, though we'd rarely turn down a good cuppa.

33

WANDERSTOP

Getting cosy with ghosts of the past

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE
DEV IVY ROAD / **PLAYERS** 1

We all love a cosy game: plant some flowers, tend to your garden, and try not to be overwhelmed by thoughts of what it would take to achieve anything close to it in real life. For an audience contending with sky-high housing costs and questionable value for money, the cosy game can offer a virtual refuge.

Developer Ivy Road was co-founded by Davey Wreden, whose previous games include The Stanley Parable and The Beginner's Guide. Both those titles are renowned for the metatextual things they unfurl into, so when the new studio's first game rocks up, pitched as a title about running a little tea shop, you know there's probably more bubbling away under the surface. Ivy Road's other co-founder, Karla Zimonja, is an alumnus of Fullbright, the studio behind Gone Home and Tacoma, so whatever that bigger picture proves to be, you can be sure it'll be rendered in narratively ambitious brushstrokes.

You are Alta, a once-mighty championship fighter who now finds herself growing ingredients and whipping up a brew. It's definitely a change of pace – and one she has mixed feelings about. Life in the tea shop is slow, with growing green shoots and brewing them into tea via an unusual contraption requiring patience. Between chores around the store, you can decorate the venue to your liking and listen to your clients' many stories. In fact, there's time to grab a cuppa yourself, sit on a bench, and listen to Alta's own thoughts as they grow increasingly insistent there's something very wrong with this picture.

> "IT'S PITCHED AS A TITLE ABOUT RUNNING A LITTLE TEA SHOP, BUT YOU KNOW THERE'S PROBABLY MORE UNDER THE SURFACE."

32

ENOTRIA: THE LAST SONG

The soulslike lightens up! Well, slightly

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 19 SEP / **PUB** JYAMMA GAMES
DEV JYAMMA GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

With approximately five million new grimdark soulslikes being released every week, it's a breath of fresh air that this one has a starring role for our old friend the sun. Screw 'Dark', welcome to *Bright* Souls! Fields of swaying yellow sunflowers look gorgeous under the sun's golden rays, making us feel all smiley and warm inside as we start getting stabbed by farmers with pitchforks.

Yes, it's the usual brutal combat experience, and everyone inexplicably hates you, but it's amazing how something as simple as 'taking place in bright daylight' can make a soulslike feel fresh, as though you're hacking and slashing your way through a particularly intense summer holiday.

SO(UL) FAMILIAR

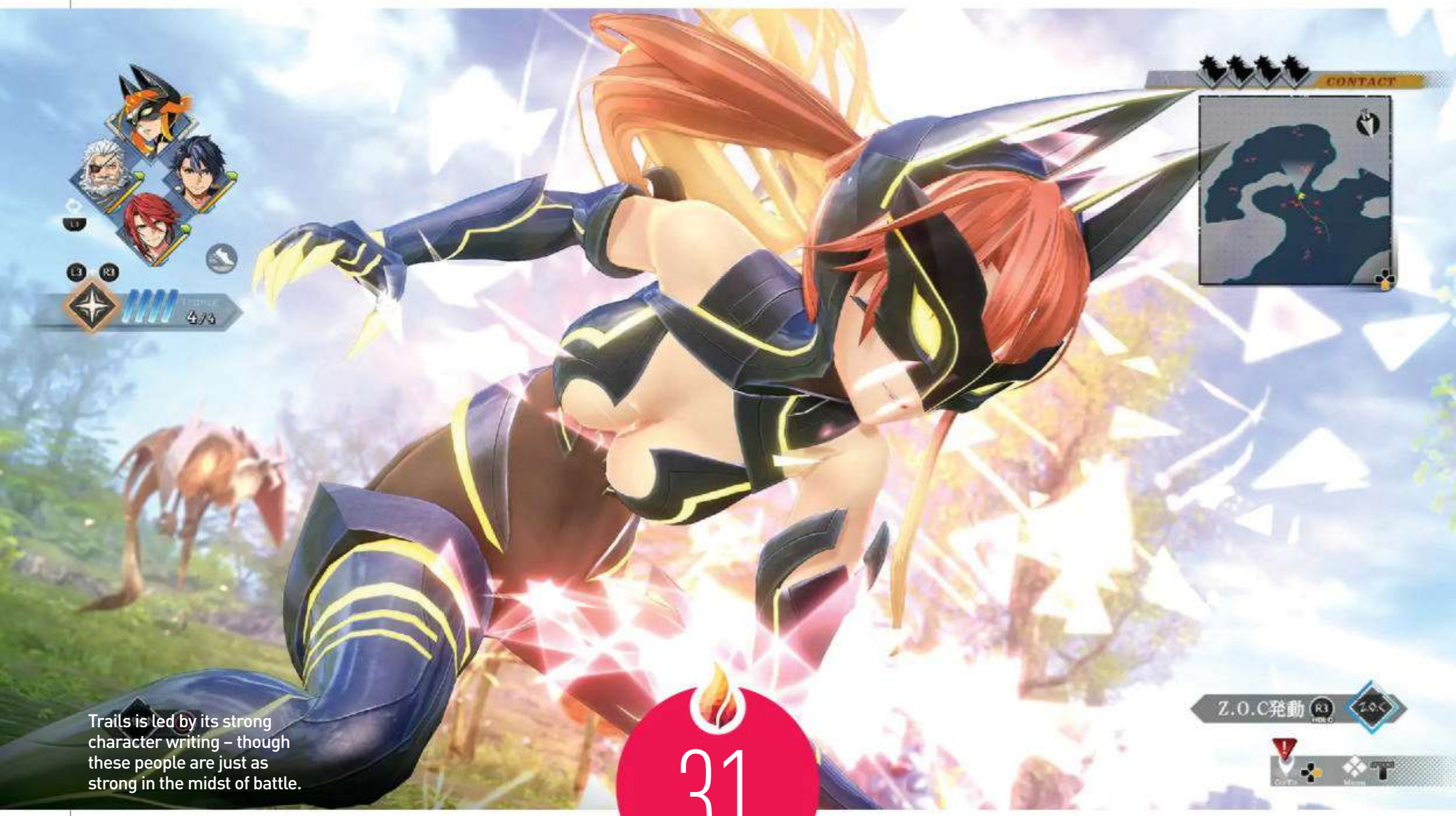
Expect high-stakes combat where you're only a mistake or two from dying. Explore lush environments, unlock shortcuts, level up your abilities, upgrade your weapons, die hundreds of times in a boss fight… the soulslike staples are all executed solidly enough here. Still, if you're not one for parrying you're not going to enjoy this. You don't carry a shield and instead have to rely on a sliver of a parry window to defend yourself. By all means see how long you can last without it, but the first boss will be giggling through your eulogy if you don't master that parry. Fortunately a successful one is rewarded with a lovely

The game seems to be set at a festival that's gone to Hell. Fyre Festival soulslike when?

"SCREW 'DARK', WELCOME TO BRIGHT SOULS."

shower of sparks like a little fireworks display. Your first hour will most likely be spent weeping and sending your Dark Souls shield drunken text messages begging it to take you back. But once you've nailed the timing of that parry consistently, Enotria is a joy to play.

That said, it feels very familiar, though there are a few fresh ideas. Equippable masks change your 'role'. For example, wear the Mask Of Change and your heavy attacks will deal more damage, the Gardener's Mask heals you after you wallop foes with certain strikes, and the Piercing Wit mask makes your writing in PLAY magazine 6,000% funnier (but sadly we forgot to equip it). You can customise your masks with boons, like one that restores health upon successful perfect parries, and with a tap of the D-pad you can switch between three masks at any time. There's brilliant potential here to have three distinct builds available at the press of a button for whatever horrors the game throws at you. It can be a little janky, and sometimes the camera apparently has filming obligations elsewhere, but Enotria demonstrates enough bright ideas to be worth keeping an eye on.



Trails is led by its strong character writing – though these people are just as strong in the midst of battle.

31

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: KAI NO KISEKI – FAREWELL, O ZEMURIA

Anime in space

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** 26 SEP (JAPAN) **/ PUB** NIHON FALCOM (JAPAN) **/ DEV** NIHON FALCOM **/ PLAYERS** 1

As the rest of the world waits to enter the republic of Calvard for the first time in Trails Through Daybreak, Kai No Kiseki, the 11th game in Nihon Falcom's long-running Trails series, is about to bring that story arc to a close in Japan, and the scope is grander than ever: the developer is putting Rean Schwarzer on the moon.

Falcom tends to revise rather than revamp its systems in sequels, so we're not expecting anything earth-shattering from Kai's combat and the blend of action and turn-based combat that Daybreak established. What *does* excite us is that the massive tale of political and technological intrigue which began in 2004's Trails In The Sky is finally heaving towards a conclusion.

After a civil war within the mafia-like Heiyue Clan, terrorist attacks nationwide, and some time-bending lore drops that start with Calvard's monarchical past and end with a device that records all of humanity's sins, Calvard is in a mess… and that's just how Roy Gramheart, the president, wants it.

> "THE MASSIVE TALE IS FINALLY HEAVING TOWARDS A CONCLUSION."

Gramheart's political ambitions and space programme are, somehow, at the centre of the series' most enduring questions, including what's really behind orbal science. The volume of tangled narrative threads is a hefty burden for one game to bear, though if Reverie and the Daybreak sub-series showed us anything, it's that Falcom regained its focus after the Cold Steel arc.

CALLING ALL HEROES

In addition to Van and his ragtag group of problem solvers and criminals, Rean Schwarzer and Altina Orion from Trails Of Cold Steel show up, along with Valimar, Rean's Divine Knight, who flies him around in space like a Gundam mech. Kevin Graham makes an appearance, and Reverie's C and Lapis are back for an encore.

These Avengers-style setups can slide into fan service, but Kai's returning characters seem chosen for their connection to the broader story and Trails' biggest mystery: what lies beyond reality's edge.

The fog, the fear, and the fights are back, though Bloober is working on an expanded vision for Silent Hill's revitalisation project.

30

SILENT HILL 2

Is this still our special place?

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 8 OCT / **PUB** KONAMI / **DEV** BLOOBER TEAM / **PLAYERS** 1

The genre-defining survival horror rises again in the shape of a remake from the developer of Layers Of Fear. In case you're unfamiliar with this ghost story, protagonist James Sunderland returns to the town of Silent Hill after receiving a letter from his late wife. James *knows* she passed away three years ago, but he's come back to their 'special place' all the same. Unfortunately, he finds a place devoid of life, shrouded in a fog that hides the monsters stalking the streets.

In the PS2 original, that fog not only set the mood, it disguised the limitations of the hardware's draw distance. Naturally, this Unreal Engine 5 remake isn't having to contend with the same *ahem* drawbacks, but Bloober is still using the veil of fog to make you feel even more isolated. Also requiring a rethink were the PS2 release's fixed camera angles, here replaced by a third-person camera that moves much more freely. Though James is still far from a front line fighter, this shift in perspective moves combat into the claustrophobic centre of the frame as he bludgeons fleshy nightmares.

Monsters in the 2001 game were less the headline act and more a source of tension to keep you moving forward. Bloober intends to expand the town from your restless dreams, offering more to explore – if not a little more room for running around beasties. Recognisable beats remain, including that car park monologue and Brookhaven Hospital, though perhaps not quite as you remember them.

> "BLOOBER INTENDS TO EXPAND THE TOWN FROM YOUR RESTLESS DREAMS."

FOGGED UP

Supporting characters Angela and Maria have both been redesigned. That's right – Maria's Christina-Aguilera-inspired 'fit is no more. She, along with the rest of the characters, has also been recast, with actress Salóme Gunnarsdóttir accompanying Luke Roberts as James.

The original performances are famous for how strangely pitched and offbeat they are, but Bloober is moving in a more straightforwardly dramatic direction for this remake. The studio's clearly attempting to preserve what made the original so beloved while also modernising the most dated aspects – let's just hope it doesn't end up taking a wrong turn down a dead end.

MARVEL RIVALS

A worthy nemesis for Overwatch

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** TBC **/ PUB** NETEASE GAMES
DEV NETEASE GAMES **/ PLAYERS** 1-12

This superhero-hero shooter seems like a slam dunk on paper: a 6v6 team-based multiplayer game, with the Marvel licence ensuring a diverse cast of characters with different abilities? Sounds *great*. Yet, as is the case with a lot of the upcoming live service fare at the moment, we leave our latest hands-on feeling equal parts excited and apprehensive for Rivals' future.

It was making the rounds prior to being announced for PS5 thanks to 'closed' (yet streamable) alpha builds, so it had already made a great first impression. With a lightly cel-shaded art style it looks gorgeous, and the team-up battle format is immediately evocative of Marvel's biggest multiversal crossover stories. The greatest villain we face during our hands-on, however, is technical trouble that apparently stems from internet connection issues, because we're playing stateside with NetEase employees in China. Oh for Doctor Strange's portals…

"WE FIND IT EASY ENOUGH TO PICK UP A CONTROLLER AND GET STUCK IN, THANKS IN PART TO OUR FAMILIARITY WITH THE HEROES."

HEROIC EFFORT

Fortunately, alpha builds have proved connections can be made with less of a problem. And, despite the issues we face, the power of friendship (or the whims of the internet) mean we do manage to get our fair share of good matches in. When it works, Marvel Rivals can simply be a lot of fun.

While hero shooters can take a while to really become engaging as you learn each character's skills, strengths, and weaknesses (and ideal counter-picks), we find it easy enough to pick up a controller and get stuck in, thanks in part to our familiarity with the basics of each superhero's powers. And yes, we do play using a DualSense. Even against several mouse-and-keyboard players, we quickly find ourselves going on killing sprees with long-ranged characters like The Punisher, Rocket Raccoon, Scarlet Witch, and Doctor Strange.

Juggling support cooldowns as Rocket or being a surprisingly effective Moira-style damage dealer as Scarlet Witch feels rewarding. Even in our limited time playing the game, we can begin to see the synergies (including the specific tag-team hero attacks) and depth that a competitive game like this needs to garner a healthy community.

The characters that leave us less impressed are the close-range brawlers; Spider-Man, Groot, and Black Panther all feel a little unwieldy, and whether it is because the internet connection isn't great or feedback's lacking when we land hits, it often feels like we are swinging at thin air.

1

BRAWL OR NOTHING

Perhaps there's a reason successful live service titles tend to be first-person shooters. The upcoming closed console beta could prove us wrong, but we worry it might be a challenge to balance this many close-range, cooldown-dependent characters with someone like The Punisher who can just lay out continuous long-range damage.

While the game modes we try (a payload-style assault and defend mission, and a king of the hill mode) are both very Overwatch-adjacent, Rivals' focus on melee combat and the fact that all characters always play from a third-person perspective makes it feel very different to that game. The camera angle means you can see more of what's going on around you, which is necessary as the 6v6 action can get chaotic.

Adding to the chaos is the fact that some of the environments are

destructible. This isn't Bad Company or Teardown-style procedural destruction; instead, it seems as though predetermined map elements can be destroyed by powerful attacks or ultimates. It's a nice touch that ensures stalemate encounters remain interesting by suddenly, drastically, changing the layout of the combat arena.

NetEase assures us that the console versions will be kept in sync with the PC version's updates, and the PlayStation-exclusive Spider-Man skin is the only difference between releases. This is welcome – Marvel Rivals is showing plenty of promise but it will live and die depending on continued support from the publisher and, more importantly, the tricky balancing of such a diverse set of characters. Yet that's also what's helping to make it feel fresh in a crowded market. It's going to take a heroic effort to gain the attention of long-time Overwatch 2 players now that game is so well established – but this *does* have the heroes.

2

3

4

1 Things can get pretty hectic on screen when Earth's Mightiest Heroes go head-to-head. **2** Everyone loves a good team-up comic! **3** The king of Wakanda doesn't quite feel like the king of the battlefield. **4** The concept of Marvel Rivals leaves NetEase with a practically endless pool of characters and designs to pull from.

28

VALORANT

We predict a Riot (tactical shooter)

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** TBC **/ PUB** RIOT GAMES
DEV RIOT GAMES **/ PLAYERS** 1-10 (ONLINE MULTIPLAYER)

This game's art style, special abilities, and objective-based PvP action might put you in mind of Overwatch, but if that's what you're anticipating, you're in for a big surprise. You won't have played an FPS quite like this (well, not unless you've already played this on PC).

The core mode is an attack-and-defend, bomb-planting setup, with other modes leaning towards traditional deathmatches. Whichever you play, you'll need to bin that Call Of Duty or Overwatch mindset. Running is often a bad idea, as not only is it extremely loud, it destroys your firing accuracy to an extent that happens in no other PlayStation game. Knowing when to sneak and when to use those abilities will be crucial to success.

27

ALIEN: ROGUE INCURSION

This is the Weyland

FORMAT PSVR2 **/ ETA** Q4 2024 **/ PUB** SURVIOS
DEV SURVIOS **/ PLAYERS** 1

Blending equal parts 'yes please' (sounds awesome) and 'no thank you' (sounds terrifying), the announcement of an Alien game in VR instantly engorged our excitement glands. What we've seen thus far has been brief and not final, but promises everything you'd hope for: a motion scanner, a gun (for what it's worth), an egg opening, and an alien scuttling across the ceiling, all in an oppressively dark environment. PSVR2 killer app incoming, perhaps?

26

NEVA

Neva have I eva

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 2024 **/ PUB** DEVOLVER DIGITAL
DEV NOMADA STUDIO **/ PLAYERS** 1

From the developer behind peaceful platformer Gris comes this gorgeously-animated platform adventure. It's the story of a traumatised young woman named Alba and her wolf travelling companion. More specifically, it's set to be about the relationship between the two, which develops as they journey together, and how the cub grows as they make their way through their beautiful but dying world. You'll have opportunities to drink in the beautifully drawn locations between moments of combat with dark, disturbing monsters.

25

WHERE WINDS MEET

I ain't afraid of no gust

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** TBC **/ PUB** NETEASE
DEV EVERSTONE STUDIO **/ PLAYERS** 1

Open world games have become commonplace, but Everstone, the studio behind this one, is working hard to make it stand out. It takes place in the countryside, villages, and cities of ancient China, and we're told the world has "realistic physical conditions". Combat is a mixture of martial arts, weapons, special abilities, and acrobatic movement. There's also promising-looking stealth, and choices to make that will affect the characters around you.

"KNOWING WHEN TO SNEAK AND WHEN TO GO LOUD WILL BE CRUCIAL TO SUCCESS."

24

SWORD OF THE SEA

Better blade than never

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC
PUB GIANT SQUID / **DEV** GIANT SQUID / **PLAYERS** 1

The Pathless was a great, atmospheric adventure that placed emphasis on smooth, satisfying movement – and Giant Squid's followup seems to cut a similar path. The captivating visuals are accompanied by an Austin Wintory soundtrack, which scores your adventure as you skate across an undulating landscape on your Hoversword. Some parts of the environment are subtly designed to mimic a skatepark, allowing you to pull tricks as you explore.

23

MARVEL 1943: RISE OF HYDRA

We could play this all day

FORMAT TBC / **ETA** 2025 / **PUB** SKYDANCE NEW MEDIA
DEV SKYDANCE NEW MEDIA / **PLAYERS** 1

So here's something different: a superhero game that's built for solo play; a cinematic trailer that promises great acting and writing; and a version of Captain America that somehow isn't annoying. Perhaps the most exciting thing about it is the involvement of Amy Hennig, the writer and creative director of Uncharted 1-3. A promise to cater equally to casual and more experienced gamers is hard to fulfil, but we think that Marvel 1943 will deliver.

22

MARVEL'S WOLVERINE

Howlett the dogs out?

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** SONY
DEV INSOMNIAC GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Logan has yet to be given the game he deserves – but if any studio can do it, it's the one that gave us the current generation's excellent Spider-Man titles. Despite a devastating company hack, details on this are still officially a closely guarded secret. Given Wolverine's got a dark and complex past that includes many deep storylines, memorable villains, and classic teamups to draw from, we can't wait to learn more about this, bub.

21

GREEDFALL II: THE DYING WORLD

A generous rise for this ambitious RPG

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** NACON / **DEV** SPIDERS / **PLAYERS** 1

The first Greedfall was a somewhat flawed yet wildly ambitious action RPG set in a grim world ravaged by warring colonists (our previous incarnation gave it 7/10). Rather than merely refining what came before, French developer Spiders is getting just as ambitious with this followup.

To start with, the studio has doubled its team size to 70 – that's a modest number for a game this pretty, but it's worth keeping in mind as the major touchpoints for Greedfall II are the likes of Baldur's Gate 3, which was made by a team of well over 400.

"YOU CONTROL THE ENTIRE PARTY SIMULTANEOUSLY WHEN YOU ENTER COMBAT, QUICKLY LINING UP ATTACK TURNS."

GREED IS GOOD

Greedfall II will be launched on PC in early access to garner community feedback before its final release. That seems wise given how overwhelmed we feel when we first go hands-on with it. This is a complex, systems-driven RPG that's going to need some streamlining. That's especially apparent in the combat, which has been entirely reworked.

In the first game you recruited party members and allies to fight by your side, yet primarily controlled the protagonist through action RPG encounters. Now you control the entire party simultaneously when you enter combat, quickly lining up attack turns for your hero-at-large and their friends. It's far from traditional, feeling like a mashup of a Dungeons-&-Dragons-style turn order with real-time slashing. You can pause the action to cue up commands, then unpause to watch attacks play out in real time, making things feel quite stop-start. Compared to the likes of, say Final Fantasy VII Rebirth, the pausing feels much more fiddly – ultimately ending up being quite demanding.

That's not necessarily a bad thing. Greedfall II feels unique to play, clearly inspired by classic turn-based RPGs but incorporating modern twists from the real-time action of the later Dragon Age or Mass Effect games. At times this works well, giving you options for how to play. Would you rather zoom out, and click at the point you want your hero to run towards? Or zoom in to an over-the-shoulder view and control them with the sticks? Up to you. But at other times it can feel like a clash of systems that are a smidge too over-complex to intuit.

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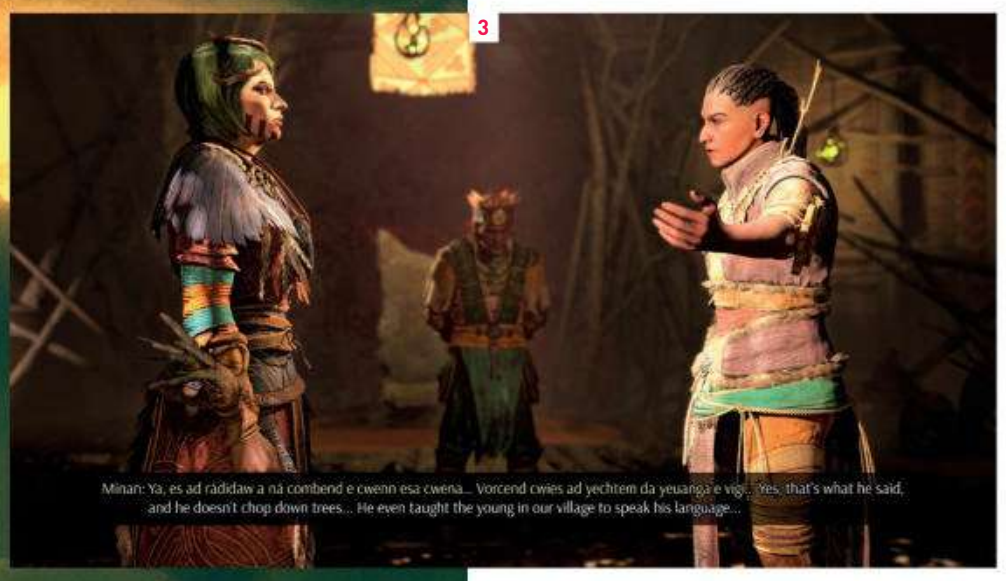
3
Minan: Ya, es ad rádidaw a nà combend e cwenn esa cwena... Vorcend cwies ad yechtem da yeuanga'e vig... Yes, that's what he said, and he doesn't chop down trees... He even taught the young in our village to speak his language...

1 Like the first game, Greedfall II will have plenty of companions but they should be more involved in combat. 2 It remains to be seen how much choices will impact the story, but our demo shows multiple ways to resolve quests. 3 It's a bold choice for the first handful of hours of a game to take place in a fictional language.

The conflict between gameplay philosophies is apt considering the game's subject matter. The player character is a native of an island that until recently was untouched by the wider 18th-century-inspired fantasy world. We encounter them as forces from the mainland have started to colonise the island with the goal of mining their land, and it's interesting to see a story like this from the position of the indigenous people. The game isn't subtle in its environmentalist and anti-colonialist messaging (though we've yet to see if it can stick the landing in the long run).

THAT'S MINE!

What we do see is some satisfying RPG questing where we take the initiative in solving the problem of a sickness affecting locals. A few dialogue trees here, a skill check there, and a little save-scumming and we find out what is causing it. It's the mining... obviously. From there we convince a few miners that their work is poisoning our tribe and persuade them to quit, crippling the operation.

Colonialism: solved. Except... not really. Despite our efforts, things take a turn when some colonists attack our village, the demo ending with us being transported to the mainland. We're told this takes place before the end of the first game, but the narrative will end after that ending, making for an interesting crossover of continuity. With early access yet to begin, it feels like the PS5 release may be a way off, but we won't be greedy – we'll wait.

20

AFTERLOVE EP

Love and loss on the streets of Jakarta

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** Q3 2024 **/ PUB** FELLOW TRAVELLER **/ DEV** PIKSELNESIA
PLAYERS 1

Rama is at a crossroads in his life. Since the tragic passing of his girlfriend Cinta a year previously, he's been hiding himself away, grieving hard and not willing to face the harsh outside world. He's now ready to get his life back together and to attempt to move past his devastating loss, but there's one problem: Cinta now lives as a disembodied voice in his head, constantly with him wherever he goes.

1

"AFTERLOVE EP IS MOSTLY FOCUSSED ON WHAT COMES NEXT, ON HOW YOU YOU COME TO TERMS WITH LOSS AND GRIEF AND MOVE ON."

Afterlove EP may be a story about loss and grief, but it's mostly focussed on what comes next, on how you come to terms with those things and move on. It's a slice-of-life adventure that follows Rama as he attempts to get his life back on track. That includes the not-so-small tasks of reuniting the band he abandoned when Cinta passed away, repairing the relationships he neglected, and discovering what his new 'normal' looks like.

We follow Rama through sections of visual-novel-style conversations, and it quickly becomes obvious that his friends harbour a lot of feelings about his disappearance – in many ways, when he withdrew, they also lost him. These conversations are wonderfully written, capturing the subtleties of conversations between former friends, specifically the pain in having shallow, polite conversations with people you used to be close to. It's emotionally resonant, and Cinta's running commentary in Rama's head, chirping in with important contextual clues as to what the friendship group used to be like, only deepens this feeling.

A big part of Rama's healing process is rekindling his love for music, told through rhythm game sections. The friend group he was once part of may be fractured, but when the former pals come together as a band they nonetheless play as one. These sections feature your standard rhythm game inputs – ↑, ↓, ←, and → – and although not incredibly engaging, each musical interlude acts as an important moment in the story. The game's soundtrack comes straight from Indonesian indie band L'Alphalpha, and their pop synths and dreamy guitar riffs accent these special moments perfectly.

Cinta's narration in Rama's mind, visible at the top of the screen, is all voice-acted.

CITY OF LOVE

When you're not tapping your toes to dreamy pop ballads, you'll be exploring the bustling streets of Jakarta, visiting various stores and meeting the locals. There's masses of visual detail packed into every street, in everything from trendy clothing stores and coffee shops to cool bars and market stalls. You're deliberately not given a map – it's an invisible invitation to wander freely until you end up at the point where the story continues. Many of the places you'll be visiting are based on real-life locations in Jakarta, and knowing that it's easy to see Afterlove EP as a love letter to Indonesia's sprawling, exciting capital city.

Deciding where you want to go ties in with who you choose to hang

out with, as Afterlove EP also features some dating sim elements. Do you want to hang out with the hip worker at the record shop, or maybe the girl with a passion for writing slam poetry? You can build the relationships you choose, and potentially find new love down the road. Cinta certainly won't be happy about it, but maybe that's for the better. Part of Afterlove EP is learning to let go, and knowing what Rama will decide concerning Cinta will remain a big question mark until the game's full release.

Coming to terms with the past is a daunting task, but for Rama it's absolutely inescapable. At its core, Afterlove EP is about reintroducing yourself to the world after an awful life event, and accepting the pain, confusion, and happiness that comes with it. Every decision we make for Rama as we help him reconnect with his friends and his music feels like a small win after a tragic loss, and hopefully we'll see him in a much happier place by the time those credits roll.

2

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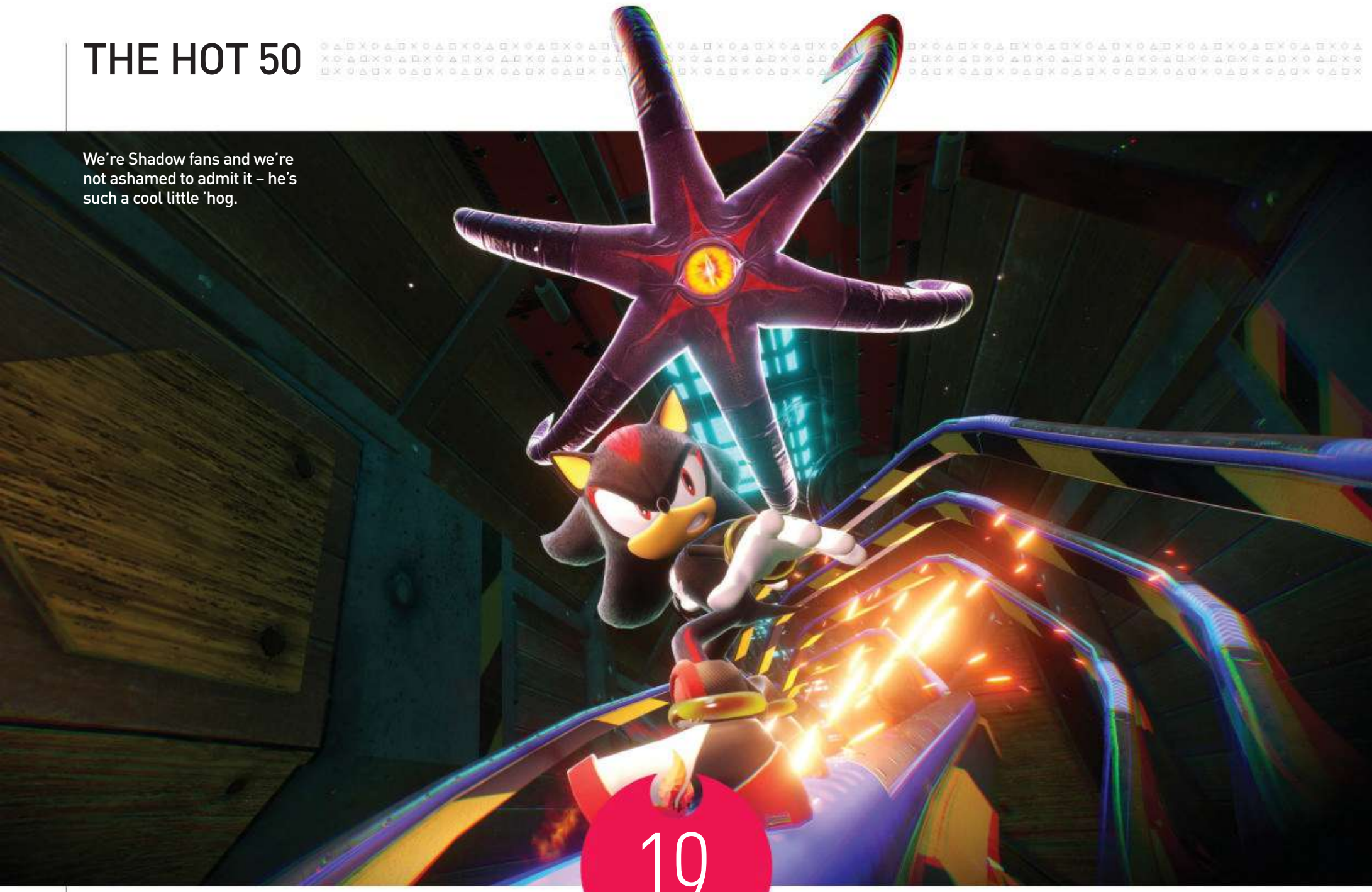
1 Afterlove EP is the final project from narrative designer and developer Mohammad Fahmi, best known as the creator of Coffee Talk, who sadly passed away in March 2022. 2 Part of Rama's journey involves his decision to start attempting therapy. 3 The game's appealing comic-inspired art is all drawn by Indonesian artist Soyatu.



We're Shadow fans and we're not ashamed to admit it – he's such a cool little 'hog.

19

SONIC X SHADOW GENERATIONS

Chaos control

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 25 OCT / **PUB** SEGA / **DEV** SONIC TEAM / **PLAYERS** 1

When it was first released on PS3 in 2011, Sonic Generations commemorated the 20th anniversary of everyone's favourite Blue Blur. For its remaster, however, with Sonic now over 30, we've a party crasher in the form of Shadow, who most Sonic fans would privately admit is their actual favourite hedgehog.

Let's be clear, the original game, which has you spin-jumping between 3D boost-based and 2D side-scrolling stages as Sonics from two eras ('modern', and a chibi 'classic' one) is still present and correct in super-smooth 4K, though the 2D physics still feel off compared to the classic 16-bit platforming it's mimicking.

But the real star of the show is Shadow's completely new, separate campaign that could almost be a standalone game, if it weren't only available bundled with the remaster.

It's an intriguing start because whereas Sonic's adventure begins in the classic Green Hill Zone, Shadow's first stage, Space Colony Ark, is based on Final Chase, his final stage in Sonic Adventure 2. It takes the stage's themes, like grinding rails in outer space, but with new level design, so it's actually a far more approachable level than the original, as is his fight against Biolizard.

> "SHADOW'S FIRST STAGE IS BASED ON HIS FINAL ONE IN SONIC ADVENTURE 2."

SHADOWPLAY

Also unlike in SA2, where he played much the same as Sonic, here he's able to use his special powers within the levels. Defeat enemies – ideally by chaining together homing attacks – and the Chaos Control gauge fills. With a squeeze of L2, time essentially freezes. One part of the stage requires this to progress, and later Doom Powers have been shown off – one has him grow wings.

We're curious as to which other stages based on Shadow's history will make the final cut; the presence of Black Doom suggests some representation of the '05 release and other deep cuts. We shall see!

18

STEAMWORLD HEIST II

Heisting on the high seas

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** 8 AUG **/ PUB** THUNDERFUL PUBLISHING **/ DEV** THUNDERFUL DEVELOPMENT **/ PLAYERS** 1

The SteamWorld series is almost 15 years old, and during that time its developer Image & Form has joined with Zoink (developer of Fe and Lost In Random) to create parent company Thunderful AB, and later merged fully with Zoink to become Thunderful Development. While city builder SteamWorld Build continued the genre-spanning series last year that game was developed by fellow Thunderful studio The Station; Heist II is the first SteamWorld game to come out of the new Image & Form/Zoink partnership.

Fortunately, despite all this corporate shuffling, the spirit of the robo-clockwork series has been kept alive. What's more, this sequel is more than just a redo, with bold changes being made to evolve the heisting action of the original.

TOOLBOX OF TRICKS

Still a 2D take on something like XCOM that has you lining up shots turn by turn (while avoiding being shredded by the tricky AI's bullets), the pacing of the missions you'll be taking on has been reworked. There's no longer a static star map; instead you control a bot-boat on the high seas as you try to figure out what's making the water your swashbuckling bots need to survive turn corrosive. Fully controllable in real time, your boat can be improved with armour and turrets that fire automatically to fend off the imperial navy between missions.

> "A 2D TAKE ON XCOM THAT HAS YOU LINING UP SHOTS TURN BY TURN."

The biggest relief for us is that SteamWorld's tone and humour are intact. While each SteamWorld game has a different feel, from Western to space pirates to medieval fairytales, they share sharp writing, a recognisable art style, and killer music that somehow manages to match each setting with a steampunk atmosphere. With more going on between missions, we're hoping to see Heist II evolve more as it progresses, given the first game ran out of (ahem) steam towards the end. The calling card says these bots will arrive soon – we'll see if they can pull off their biggest job yet.

Yar-har fiddly-dee, bein' a robot is the life for me!

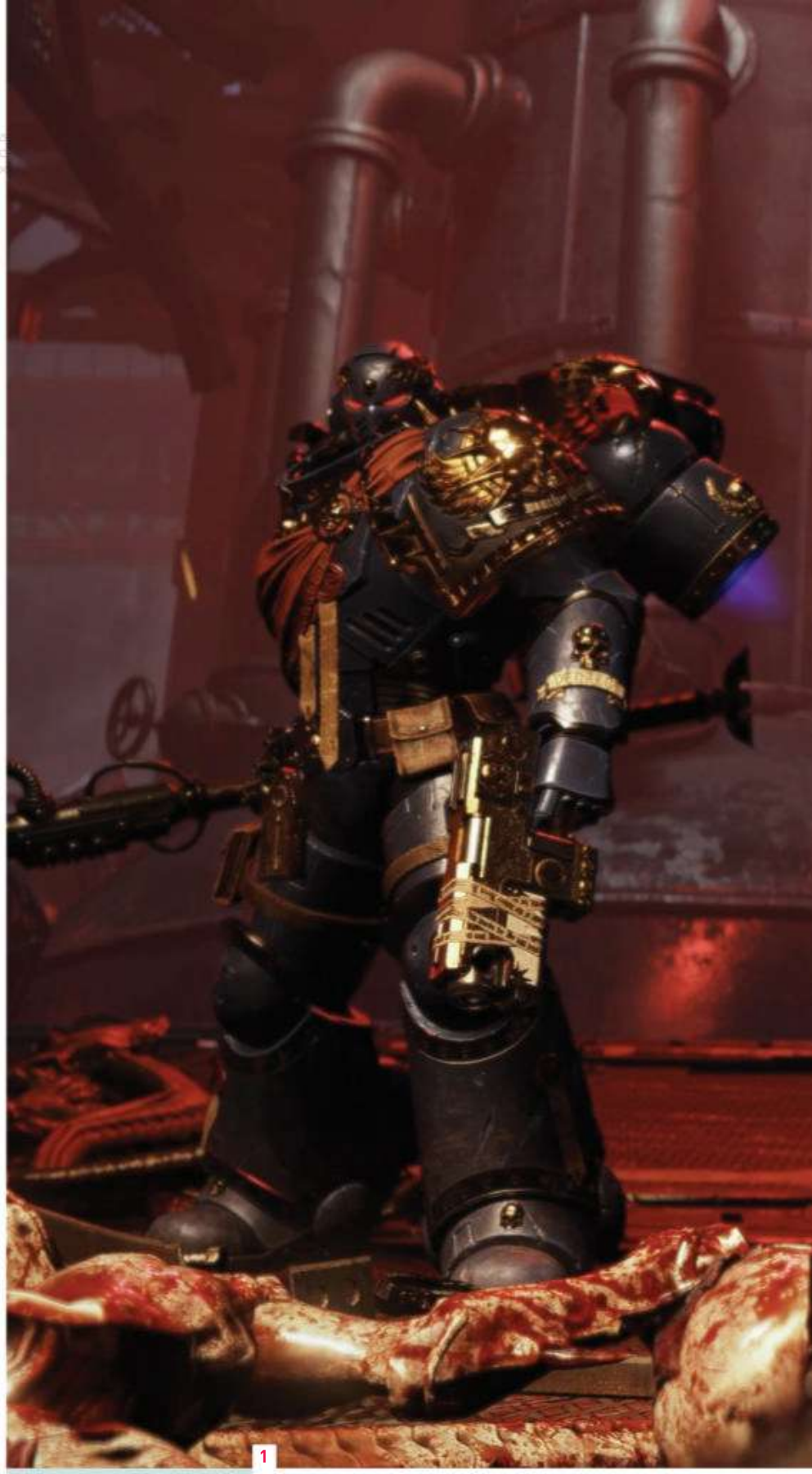
17

WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

Up to your pauldrons in science-fiction action

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 9 SEP / **PUB** FOCUS ENTERTAINMENT / **DEV** SABER INTERACTIVE
PLAYERS 1-12 (ONLINE MULTIPLAYER MODES)

Every legacy sequel raises a simple question: 'Why?' Thirteen years after developer Relic Entertainment first introduced us to Captain Titus, Saber Interactive is picking up the chainsword. Creative director Oliver Hollis-Leick explains why now is the time to return to the front line.



1

"BECAUSE OF OUR SWARM TECHNOLOGY, WE'RE ABLE TO POPULATE THE ENTIRE LANDSCAPE WITH ENEMIES IN THE SKY, ON THE LAND."

"Games Workshop, over the years, have been approached many times by different companies who wanted to make this game. And from what I understand they never found quite the right developer," Hollis-Leick begins. "And when we approached them we came to them with a new possibility, which was namely our swarm technology; Saber has a completely proprietary engine."

As we go hands-on alongside two AI-controlled comrades, the alien tyranid hordes overtake the screen, putting us, and the hardware, through our paces.

"Warhammer 40,000 is an epic universe, and it's never about small-scale battles between a few people on this side and a few people on that side," Hollis-Leick tells us. "It's about the entire *vista* [being] dominated by warfare. And so because of our swarm technology, we're able to populate the entire landscape with actual enemies in the sky, on the land."

CHAINSWORD GANG

For the uninitiated, this – a vista-full of spiny aliens against three absolute mad lads – is actually a fairer fight than it first appears.

"Space Marines are so incredibly powerful that every time you add a new Space Marine, you have to really up the ante in terms of what they're facing in order to justify having that much power," Hollis-Leick says. "We found that three really was the magic number in our case – [in story co-op] we could balance it very well."

Hollis-Leick then quips, "Three versus 500."

Every story mission is playable in co-op with two other heavily armoured chums, partly because "the sense of brotherhood is so inherent to [the] story." PvE shows another side of the sprawling conflict too, seeing you and two buds donning the armour of three other characters.

Warhammer's marines are instantly recognisable, even amid chaotic action.

"The great thing about our PvE mode is that it's directly linked to the story," Hollis-Leick explains. "So, during the [narrative] campaign, you'll hear radio chatter and engage in radio conversations with other Space Marines, and then you'll go and play *their side* of that conversation. So you'll see the kind of hell they were facing, and how they dealt with it, and you're actually all contributing towards the same objectives at different points on the battlefield."

SCRAP METTLE

But if you took one look at this roster of beefy lads and your first reaction was to say to no-one in particular, 'Let them fight,' then you're also in luck. PvP sees teams of six customising their own Space

Marines before duking it out in a selection of modes.

Hollis-Leick pitches the PvP action this way: "It's good, old-fashioned, red-versus-blue type madness out there. So that's Chaos versus Space Marines, and that's just plain old fun."

Whether you're a Games Workshop superfan who knows their Khorne from their Nurgle, or know nothing about Warhammer but were struck by actor Clive Standen's committed performance as the new voice of Captain Demetrian Titus, Space Marine 2 has its sights set on you.

"For people who played the first game, it is a continuation of that story," Hollis-Leick says. "They'll discover things about Titus they didn't know, they will hear about everything that's happened [in the 200 years] since he's been gone [...] But in terms of new players, I really think they will fall in love with the Warhammer universe after playing this game. They'll see how rich it is and how much it has to offer."

2

3

1 Primaris Space Marines, 'crossing the Rubicon,' 'xenos' – this sequel not only decodes what all that means, it also pits you against swarms of bloodthirsty beasties. **2** Kadaku is a lush-looking planet – though we doubt it'll still look as pretty after a few battles against tyranids. **3** Judging by his armour, this guy's a member of the heretic Black Legion.

16

RISE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL

The gold standard for investigaming

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** PLAYSTACK / **DEV** COLOR GRAY GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Sure, a picture can paint a thousand words. But which words are the right ones? That's the challenge in this generation-spanning brainteaser that tasks you with investigating not just the golden idol but those who covet and kill for its world-shaping powers.

Each puzzle is a moment frozen in time, often revolving around murders. They're not quite static; you can click around, look through people's pockets, visit nearby areas, and eavesdrop on chatter. Letters and objects aren't all you're looking for, though. You can also collect keywords, which you can place into blank spaces on solution cards to see if you've figured out what happened.

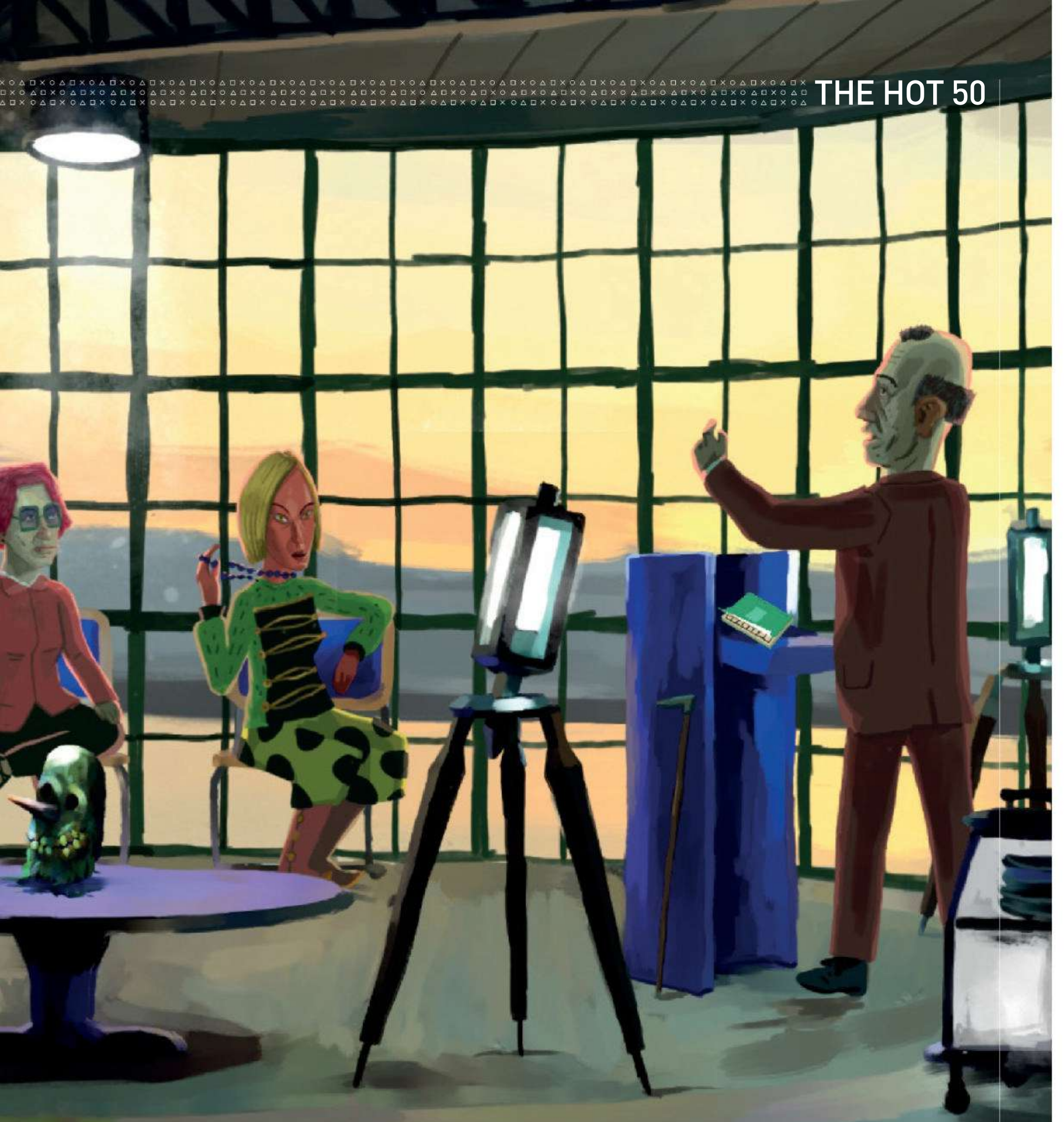
IDOL CLICKER

Unlike its PC-exclusive predecessor, The Case Of The Golden Idol, Rise is less of a pixel hunt. Each time you come across keywords they're added to your word list in a big batch, and organised by category by default (previously you had to organise them yourself). This means you spend much less time on busywork and much more scratching your noggin.

Playing through the first batch of cases, we've already had to do a hefty amount of cross-referencing, which might mean Rise is able to deliver a greater challenge thanks to the tighter focus.

Filling solution cards in isn't something you do purely to concretely lay out what happened. As well as paragraphs with gaps to fill in, there are diagrams and the like to confirm characters' names, and the roles they play. One puzzle, involving two bodies found in a construction yard accident, requires us to deduce each worker's name and the machines they operated in order to figure out what happened, which we do by using photos we find

The first game's pixel art has been replaced with a more painterly look – but it still feels like Golden Idol, with a similarly exaggerated aesthetic.



in their machines' cabs, letters, and other clues.

Get close to a solution and you'll be nudged if you have two or fewer points on a card wrong. It's a helpful system without being too easy to abuse. It also makes it easy to take swings and try answers you're not certain about. Most importantly, the solution cards prompt you to think about connections, which can expertly induce a sense of dread as your stomach begins to drop realising you're moments away from a dreadful truth.

While each puzzle's solutions are fairly standalone, they combine to tell a connected story. Which does mean knowledge gained completing prior puzzles can inform later ones, from simply recognising returning characters to undertanding their motivations. These come together at the end of a puzzle group, where a combined solution card not only tasks you with reiterating some of the information gathered using keywords across them all, but prompts you to read between the lines as well, sometimes pulling in information observable in each but not really utilised until that point.

> "WHILE EACH PUZZLE'S SOLUTIONS ARE FAIRLY STANDALONE, THEY COMBINE TO TELL A CONNECTED STORY."

At this point we've yet to see how Rise connects to the earlier game, which we'd love to see ported in similarly streamlined fashion. But, set in the 1970s, 300 years after the first game, this new series of murders seems to stand apart for now. Leaning into the setting, we're just as hooked by paranoia around drugs and television as we are that glittering golden idol… for now.

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METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

You know this part – all together now...

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** TBC **/ PUB** KONAMI **/ DEV** KONAMI **/ PLAYERS** 1

Snake drops into a lush jungle in the Soviets' back garden on a mission to extract a defecting scientist. Everything, from weapons to food, must be procured on-site to ensure he goes undetected. What a thrill.

Following the release of the Metal Gear Solid: Master Collection remasters last year, the Virtuous mission is enjoying the remake treatment. This Unreal Engine 5 rebuild has impressive technical flourishes, such as an extremely extra injury system that sees every bullet *not* dodged persist on Snake's body as a scar (or worse).

NOT FOR HONOUR

Konami would like people who have no idea what 'Metal Gear' means to start with this remake. Taking place in 1964, it's the earliest chapter in the *timeline* but that doesn't mean it's the best introduction to all of that sexual tension between Ocelot and Snake – uh, we mean, the world of Metal Gear Solid.

The developers are retaining much of the original's vision, closely referencing the cutscene shot composition throughout. Much of the 2004 release's voice acting has been preserved too, with David Hayter returning to one of his most iconic roles. If you're already acquainted with the series, you'll be pleased to know you have a choice in how you redeploy. There's the new-style control system, with a more modern, over-the-shoulder camera, and then there's the legacy control system, with an overhead view designed with stealth in mind. Selecting the latter also applies a green filter that emulates the original colour grading. Pleasing new players *and* longtime fans is tricky; here's hoping Konami's mission is a Snake-style success.

Whether you opt for over-the-shoulder modern controls or top-down legacy ones, Snake remains one of PlayStation's coolest heroes, hands down.

14

HADES II

About to put a spell on you

FORMAT TBC **/ ETA** 2025 **/ PUB** SUPERGIANT GAMES
DEV SUPERGIANT GAMES **/ PLAYERS** 1

Sibling rivalry can only go so far when you've been separated from your family at birth and raised by witches in the woods – but this sequel's star, Melinoë, is faring well compared to her brother Zagreus from the original Hades.

Her magical upbringing permeates every part of Hades II. Almost every attack can be charged up to become a spell blast, varying from weapon to weapon. It might be a massive, area-splurging ripple of power from a giant axe, or a spread of flying, teleporting daggers. No matter where she fights, be it up toward Olympus or down toward Tartarus, she's always in control of the cadence of battles. That's right, there are multiple routes now, plus a livelier hub that enhances the live-die-repeat roguelike structure. Hell is shaping up to be heavenly.

All those years living with witches weren't misspent: Melinoë can always use her magic circle to buff herself while slowing enemies. Who's in charge now?

13

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 6

Going rogue

FORMAT PS5, PS4 **/ ETA** 25 OCT **/ PUB** ACTIVISION **/ DEV** TREYARCH, RAVEN SOFTWARE
PLAYERS 1 (CAMPAIGN), MULTI (ONLINE MODES)

Nostalgia for the '90s meets conspiracy thriller in Blops 6's single-player campaign, with fan-favourite multiplayer mode Zombies also rising from the dead.

The FPS's mainline story sees returning character Frank Woods working to uncover a plot that goes all the way to the top, with help from his protegé Troy Marshall. There are multiple possible paths through missions, and varied combat styles plus social mechanics that allow you to manipulate your way to the heart of the mystery.

The new 'omnimovement' system in both the single-player story and Zombies mode sees you sliding and diving for cover like an action hero. The latter co-op horde mode hits the ground running with the Dark Aether storyline and will enjoy two fresh maps at launch, plus more bumps in the night yet to be revealed.

This FPS is trading heavily on '90s nostalgia to make you feel like all your favourite throwback heroes in one. We're always up for some retro fun.

12

DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD

The veil is thin here; let's finally fix it

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** AUTUMN 2024 / **PUB** EA / **DEV** BIOWARE / **PLAYERS** 1

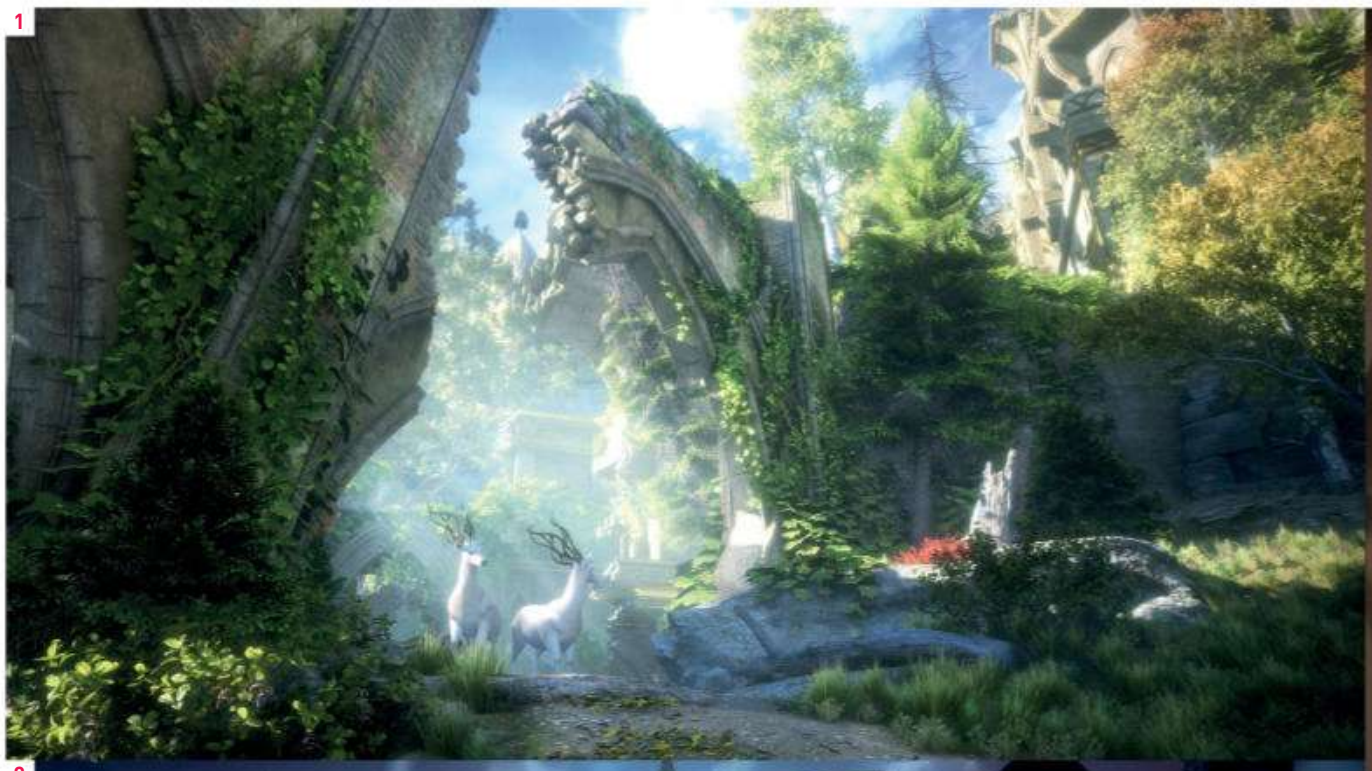
One of gaming's most epic cliffhangers has also turned out to be its longest – ten years ago, at the end of Dragon Age: Inquisition (nine years if you count from its vital Trespasser DLC) we found out that Solas, the elven mage who had guided us in our quest across Thedas as the Inquisitor, had been using us to further his own goals. A beloved egg, turned rotten.

The Veilguard has been in development since 2015, before probably falling victim to publisher EA's focus on other Bioware games, namely Anthem and Mass Effect: Andromeda. Work on the game, then known under a codename, began with multiplayer and live service elements in mind, both of which were later scrapped. Internal issues also delayed development, with layoffs at Bioware happening as recently as August 2023. But finally The Veilguard (renamed from Dreadwolf) seems to be within reach. We've had our biggest look yet at the fourth game in the series. There is a new team. There are old favourites. There is *action*. Dragon Age is back, and the veil will be lifted as soon as the coming autumn.

TE-VINTER'S TALE

In addition to meeting the new party members you'll be growing to love (and sometimes hate) during your lengthy quest, we've also taken a look at the game in action

Whether you're looking for a fight or romance, you'll find it in Dragon Age... if you survive.



1 It looks like we'll be revisiting the Hinterlands. But who asked for a return trip? 2 Minrathous, the capital of dark magic, looks appropriately dark and stormy here. 3 The rogue fighting style includes a lot of cool flourishes. 4 New album cover just dropped – your new team are a good-looking bunch.

» through the dark streets of Minrathous, the capital of Tevinter. This is the first time players have been able to set foot in the land of mages, home to characters such as Dorian Pavus. It's nice to finally be able to explore a location that's been referenced so much, but The Veilguard doesn't take place in a single city. You can also look forward to visiting Antiva and the elven city of Arlathan, among others.

Depending on what background you choose for them, protagonist Rook can begin with varying ties to different factions, including being a member of the Shadow Dragons, a Tevene resistance group that we're most likely going to hear a lot about throughout The Veilguard.

But back to the treacherous Solas, whose actions influence all the events we've seen in Minrathous. He's trying to pierce the Veil, the barrier between the real world and the Fade, unleashing demons in the process. Reminiscent of Inquisition, which was all about closing rifts in the Veil – *so many rifts* – it's a comfortable setup for transitioning from one game to the next.

Our Rook, customised to be a male rogue, makes his way across the city with the help of Varric and Scout Harding, who is now available as a companion. As in previous games, Rook's class is customisable, and while we don't know how the classes will affect the feeling of combat yet, Dragon Age seems to have gone further down the road of quick, easily approachable real-time encounters. Rook's moves feel right out of a hack-and-slash; he only ceases his flurry of knife attacks for a quick strum of his bow. As in Mass Effect, you use an ability wheel to use Rook's abilities and give commands to your party members where needed. It looks like fluid fun and it features some beautiful lighting effects, but it also seems like it might get a bit mashy and repetitive – at least at this early stage of the game. It also couldn't be further from classic turn-based RPG combat, which admittedly the series has been turning away from since Dragon Age II.

In Tevinter, you meet your first companion-to-be, the ice mage Neve (pronounced Né-fuh) Gallus. To answer the important question: all companions will be romanceable regardless of the protagonist's gender. After some more fighting, the demo ends with Varric confronting Solas, to no avail. The

elf is dead set on tearing the Veil open and destroying modern Thedas so that an old world order can take over. We have to say we're concerned by the absolutely wooden, perfunctory dialogue. Solas' motivation, too, is a classic one for an RPG villain – clearly disappointed in the world, he just wants to take it all down. As we spent the last game growing close to the now-antagonist, we're hoping we get more time unpacking the big turn.

What the in-game footage does show, however, is that the classic, urgent Dragon Age atmosphere remains intact – something you might have worried about if you've only watched the story trailer. Fairly quip-heavy, and set to an epic trailer version of David Bowie's Heroes, it gives more of a Guardians Of The Galaxy vibe than classic Dragon Age, but it also introduces us to some

Series stalwarts Varric and Scout Harding can still hold their own in a brawl.

occupations we haven't encountered in the series before.

BEYOND THE VEIL

Neve, for example, is a private investigator, an unusual job in a high fantasy setting. Female elf Bellara is a Veil jumper, which looks like someone who goes in and out of the Fade for fun and profit. The other companions are great callbacks to Dragon Age history and fall within more traditional RPG classes – human rogue Lucanis Dellamorte, for example, is the grandson of the first leader of the Antivan Crows, the famed house of assassins Dragon Age companion Zevran was a member of. Human mage Emmrich Volkarin, meanwhile, is one of the Mortalitasi, the funerary mages from Nevarra who dabble in necromancy. He'll even have his own skeletal assistant – clearly good help is hard to come by if you feel the need to keep employing them post-death. Since Qunari are undoubtedly the best fantasy race and you should always have a romanceable Qunari companion, it's great to see you get that in Taash, a female dragon hunter. Last but not least there is Davrin, the elf warden. It's nice to welcome a warden back into the party, although no one can replace Alistair in our hearts. Davrin's elven vallaslin tattoo also looks a bit like a goatee, but we don't want to judge a character by his unfortunate body modification choices.

Nine years of on/off development and staff turnover mean that most of the people who worked on previous Dragon Age games are no longer with Bioware, and it's natural to be mildly apprehensive about the final product. Creative director John Epler calls The Veilguard a "classic Dragon Age experience" and promises some of the deepest companion quests of the series, which arguably have always been the best part of the games. We don't doubt it's all going to come together, but we're prepared for things to feel slightly different. To quote another famous David Bowie song: ch-ch-ch-changes, time may change me, but I can't trace time.

"CREATIVE DIRECTOR JOHN EPLER PROMISES SOME OF THE DEEPEST COMPANION QUESTS OF THE WHOLE DRAGON AGE SERIES."

11

DRAGON QUEST III HD-2D REMAKE

A pixel-sharp recreation that breathes new life into old-school RPG adventuring

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 14 NOV **/ PUB** SQUARE ENIX **/ DEV** SQUARE ENIX, ARTDINK **/ PLAYERS** 1

You shouldn't judge a book by its cover, nor a game by its name. But in this case, HD-2D Remake does what it claims. It helps that Square Enix itself coined the term, going beyond the excellent traditionally-styled Project Octopath to bring us stellar remakes in the form with Live A Live and Star Ocean 2.

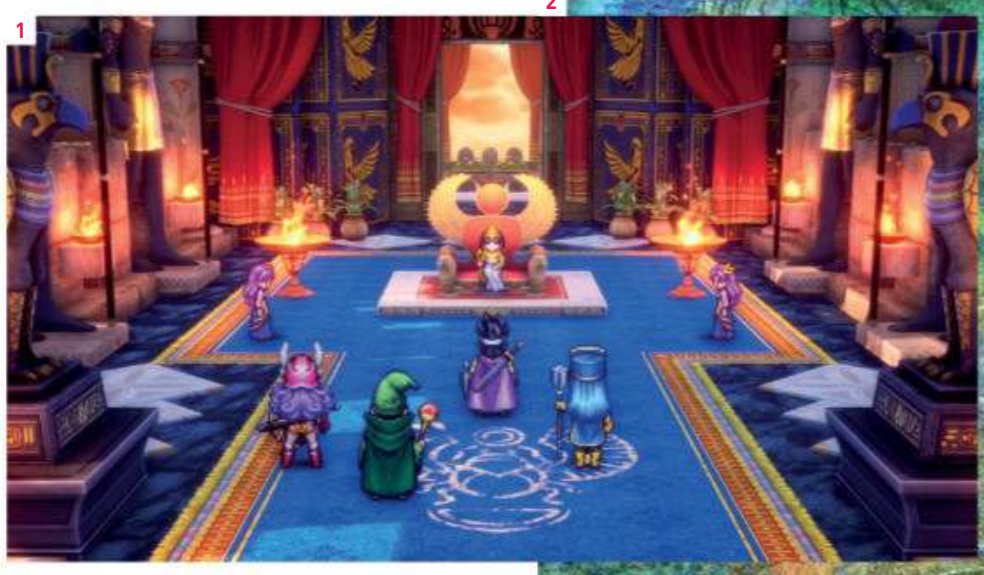
Even though we know what to expect when we start our hands-on at level one, just past the intro sequence, it's still beautiful to behold. Recreating the sharp-edged pixels of the original visuals, the developers have added depth by making them resemble pop-up-book dioramas with smooth rather than grid-based movement, enriched by naturalistic lighting. Expect plenty of flickering torches in caverns and open-sky towers that let the sun in. The modern techniques make it look gorgeous, while Akira Toriyama's character and monster designs are kept close to how they originally looked, ensuring they retain their charm.

dimension. But once again it's neatly packaged alongside retro-sounding sound effects when you, say, move between areas. Time passes as you wander around the open world, going from bright blue skies to sunset, reflected in battles that occur randomly (in traditional fashion). Like other aspects of the game these scraps feel classic, but have been enhanced with new animations plus quality-of-life tweaks such as auto-battle and fast-forwards to help you grind through them all.

At our low levels, fights can get tough if we aren't paying attention. This is the sort of experience where doing a few circuits to level up is a boon. Yet we find it less brutal than the 1988

> "THE MODERN TECHNIQUES MAKE IT LOOK GORGEOUS, WHILE AKIRA TORIYAMA'S CHARACTER AND MONSTER DESIGNS RETAIN THEIR CHARM."

1



2

PUFFED UP

New orchestration adds to the sense that the devs have taken old school foundations and added an extra

1 Your Hero follows in their father's footsteps to slay Baramos. Can you succeed where he failed? 2 Erdrick is as much a title as a name, and is bestowed on the hero at the end of DQIII. Confusingly, in Japan it's Roto. 3 Combat can be tough, but additions like auto-battle make scraps less of a grind.

original – a good thing! Limited to the starting island, we still find plenty of interest outside the main quest – such as trademark quirky characters (the translation is quite silly), items hidden inside pots, and hiding spot pockets with extra treasure dotted around the world map – simply by poking around .

Slicing up iconic beasties like slimes, bunicorns, and batterflies in tunnels, towers, and deserts is just the beginning of a long journey across a pretty large world map. Originally titled Dragon Quest III: The Seeds Of Salvation, the game follows your Hero's journey to take up the quest to slay Baramos – one your father, Ortega, failed to complete years ago. In 1988, this was a huge leap forward for both the series and the RPG genre. In addition to the day/night cycle, things like new stat types, classes, and the ability to switch your party members were game changers.

Square Enix has announced Dragon Quest I+II HD-2D Remake to follow. Despite the numbering, they chronologically take place after this one (and the three are known together as the Erdrick Trilogy). It remains to be seen whether updates will make DQIII, a prequel that played with player expectations, the best place to begin. But what is clear is that this is a fantastic way to revisit a traditional RPG – it's a genuine pleasure to play. HD-2D is a format so good that playing old RPGs any other way (like the Final Fantasy Pixel Remasters) has us yearning for them to be given the same treatment; a real level up.

10

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

Big monsters, bigger world

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025 / **PUB** CAPCOM / **DEV** CAPCOM / **PLAYERS** MULTI

Ushered behind closed doors to take a look at the next Monster Hunter, we come away thoroughly impressed. While Monster Hunter Rise filled the beastie battling hole in our lives post-Monster Hunter: World, its handheld origins were rather obvious. Monster Hunter Wilds, on the other hand, is pushing the series to new heights, soaring just like a Rathalos.

While we're still awaiting a hands-on, the hands-off demo is played in front of us in real time by a Capcom expert (obvious as the LA heat causes a couple of crashes). Taken through a full hunt for an Alpha Doshaguma, the first thing we notice about Wilds is how much less friction there is between players and the best parts of the monster hunting experience.

A WILD, WILD WORLD

Wilds takes place in several open world areas; we're told each is about twice as large as any in World. These don't simply contain the biomes and habitats of huge monsters. Within the same space you'll find your main base, where you will accept quests, forge weapons, and (most importantly) chow down on some really good-looking food. There's no need for an entirely separate hub area.

The team are keen to emphasise to us that between picking up the hunting quest and slaying the beast there are no loading screens whatsoever. In fact, even after

"WE'RE TOLD EACH OF THE GAME'S OPEN AREAS IS ABOUT TWICE AS LARGE AS ANY IN MH: WORLD."

These monsters *really* want to eat you.

they've slayed the Doshaguma, the player isn't teleported back to the hub. Instead, there's now the option to stay out in the plains to scavenge for equipment or continue hunting.

Wilds' world feels much more alive than previous games'. As the hunter leaves camp they spot a village hidden in the shade, full of NPCs who spend their days making cheese. Only a few metres later, they enter the barren desert and begin the hunt. There's less downtime between the moments that make the series great, yet even more space to make everything feel connected.

THAT'S GONNA SLING

Rather than the changes making this often-intimidating series harder to get into, quality-of-life improvements make this a friendlier place for budding hunters to begin. Your hook slinger allows you to pick up items from the ground while staying mounted, you can have your mount auto-target certain items needed to make concoctions, and, biggest of all, hunters can now equip two main weapons at once.

Which isn't to say the game is easier or simpler than previous Monster Hunters. Mechanically, the action is more chaotic than ever before, the world's many systems colliding to create memorable moments of panic and, importantly, overcoming the odds. During our demo the hunter separates the Alpha Doshaguma from the rest of the pack by leading it through a canyon, where a subterranean creature begins swallowing the sand and any monsters trapped in it. After that they lead the Doshaguma into a Mad Max: Fury Road-style sandstorm, which engulfs the sunswept desert in a blue hue full of lightning that can strike both the beast and us if we're not careful.

By the time we see our hunter engage with the new 'clash' mechanic – using their greatsword to stop the Doshaguma from eating them and then countering with a devastating blow – and the new 'wound' system for attacking weak points, we're sold. Monster Hunter: World was a huge step forward for the series into the mainstream; now Monster Hunter Wilds wants to take that a big beastie step further by combining ambitious world systems with approachable mechanics that enable everyone to join the hunt.

09

PHANTOM BLADE ZERO

Wuxia cinema meets Devil May Cry

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** TBC **/ PUB** S-GAME **/ DEV** S-GAME **/ PLAYERS** 1

When Phantom Blade Zero was first unveiled a little over a year ago, some doubted how much gameplay was actually shown due to just how cinematic this wuxia-inspired action looked in the trailer. Having now been hands-on with it, we're pleased to report that it's definitely more than pretty cutscenes – though its full release may still be a way off.

We play through three short sequences that showcase different weapon sets and a tricky boss fight. While we struggle to get a sense of what the rhythm of play will feel like over longer stretches, moment-to-moment Phantom Blade Zero feels fantastic, a mix of Devil May Cry character action with Sekiro's parrytastic precision combat.

You'll get the chance to show your stuff with katana, longswords, and daggers, two of which can be equipped at once (and switched between on the fly to extend combos). Two ranged weapons complement our close-up slashing. The longbow works like you'd expect, peppering damage relatively quickly from long range, whereas a gigantic cannon shaped like a lion's head takes longer to charge up but delivers more bombastic results.

IMPATIENT ZERO

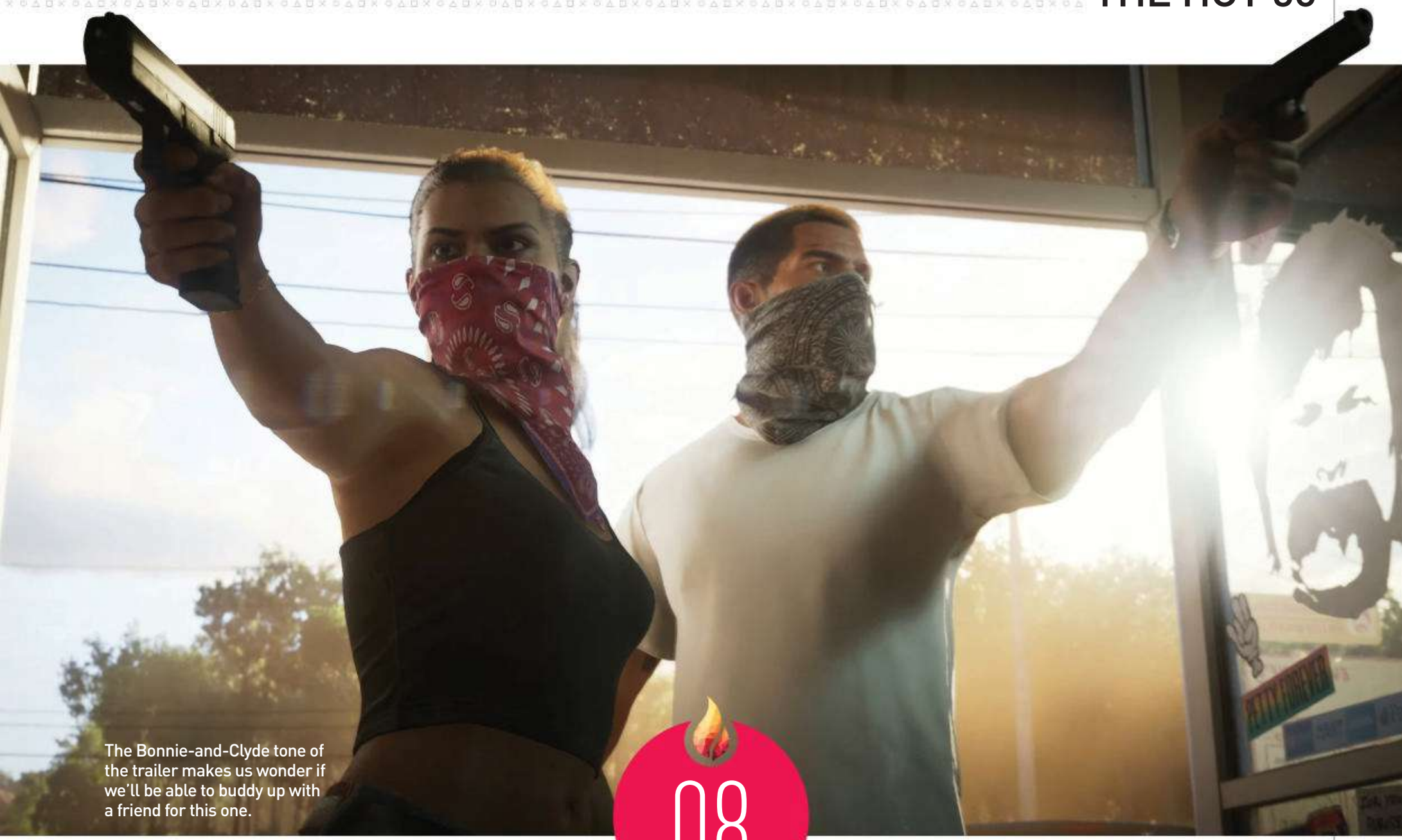
Clashes are fast, the variety of combos on offer making you feel stylish until you get bashed yourself and realise how challenging it is. While there's no air juggle in what we play, attacks flow into each other as our hero pirouettes and dodges like the wirework performers who make wuxia movies so iconic.

Dispatching regular foes is one thing, but when we cross blades with a boss the encounter is more soulslike. An ominous cutscene showing a disfigured humanoid winding up its clockwork arm fits the mould, as does its one-hit kill opening attack that makes us jump as we're instantly decapitated (to the amusement of the PR who's watching us). It's a tough encounter, requiring patience and health/stamina management, unlike the rest of what we play of the game.

We're eager to see how the two parts fit together. This is shaping up to be a character action that could stand among the greats – impressive stuff given S-Game's previous works have much smaller in scale. Though it does mean we may be waiting a while to see more. We'll be studying the blade in the meantime.

"OUR HERO PIROUETTES AND DODGES LIKE AN ACTOR IN AN ICONIC WUXIA MOVIE."

Phantom Blade Zero is a soft remake of S-Game's debut Rainblood: The Town Of Death, though significantly expanded.



The Bonnie-and-Clyde tone of the trailer makes us wonder if we'll be able to buddy up with a friend for this one.

08

GRAND THEFT AUTO VI

The ruler of the crime sandbox returns

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025 / **PUB** ROCKSTAR GAMES / **DEV** ROCKSTAR GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1 (MINIMUM?)

There was probably a higher chance of Sony announcing it was ending production of PS5 and bringing back the Walkman than of Grand Theft Auto VI making an appearance at Summer Game Fest. Rockstar long ago started a mildly irritating tradition of releasing a tantalising teaser and then going completely silent for what feels like forever.

Still, we're always happy to have an excuse to watch that trailer for the 195-millionth time, and fortunately this one rewards repeat viewings and keeps on fuelling our speculations. Surely, *surely* the abundance of social media and news/bodycam footage – a whole *20 seconds* of the one-minute-30-second trailer! – must be gesturing at some sort of social media mechanic, right? What if instead of rating Deliveroo and Uber drivers out of five, we're in for a Grand Theft Auto with NPCs who rate us on how chaotically we commit our crimes? Or where we capture things on camera ourselves?

Death has always been too easy to shrug off in GTA – you simply stroll out of the hospital with your wallet a little lighter. But what if this time we lose our precious followers and subscribers when we die? The hellscape that is social media is practically *begging* to be satirised, and with Saints Row sadly probably gone for good along with developer Volition (RIP), we'd love it if Rockstar were to step up and bring back the comic writing that made GTA IV and Chinatown Wars such chucklesome delights.

> "THE HELLSCAPE THAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA IS PRACTICALLY BEGGING TO BE SATIRISED."

VICE PRETTY

We know VI is going to be the most beautiful, advanced GTA ever. How could it not be? This is from a developer that has raised the bar for the open world game with every major release. Dare we expect an increase in explorable interiors, to make the city feel even more alive? Dynamic NPCs who put the single-line-spouting mannequins in other games to shame? Or a GTA that goes full Baldur's Gate 3, and diverts with every playthrough based on your decisions? We'd love a 'no-crimes' run where everything is basically sedate. Failing all that, Rockstar, how about sticking PSP's sublime Chinatown Wars on PS Plus to keep us happy until you're finally ready to show more of what's undoubtedly going to be 2025's hottest game?

Nothing else looked or played like the first game, which was wildly original – and the sequel looks set to raise the bar with even more distinctive imagery.

07

DEATH STRANDING 2: ON THE BEACH

Weird, wonderful, and coming next year

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 2025 **/ PUB** SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
DEV KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS **/ PLAYERS** 1, ONLINE MULTIPLAYER FEATURES

Did you think the first game was bizarre and beautiful? Because the sequel seems set to up the ante. Actors Norman Reedus and Léa Seydoux reprise their roles as Sam Porter Bridges and Fragile respectively, while Troy Baker makes a surprise comeback as purveyor of face paint and now sick guitar solos Higgs. As Fragile explains in a recent trailer, it looks like he found his way back from death just to kill Sam and his allies.

Connecting the few survivors who subsist in this futuristic dystopia remains a key part of what you do, though human porters like Sam are increasingly being replaced by bots. That said, Sam is still trekking through breathtaking environments, though what we've seen so far looks a lot less green than we're used to seeing; the previous game's verdant vistas are giving way to dunes and rocky cliff faces. Even with all Bridges' hardware, it was already hard out there – what fresh logistical challenges await us now?

Well, for a start, tides of Timefall! A splash of this on your face, and you can kiss your skincare regime goodbye as this perilous precipitation rapidly accelerates the effects of time on any surface it comes into contact with. We've seen Sam legging it from an encroaching deluge as player-built structures crumble in its wake, not to mention all the beasties emerging from black tides elsewhere. Fortunately Sam's rocking a more lethal arsenal to compensate.

"AS FRAGILE EXPLAINS, IT LOOKS LIKE HIGGS FOUND HIS WAY BACK FROM DEATH JUST TO KILL SAM AND HIS ALLIES."

The theme of connection is still central, that much is clear. As for baby-babbling, cyborg-ninja-fighting Higgs… uh, the jury is still out on that one!

06

DOOM: THE DARK AGES

Crashing back down to earth

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 2025 **/ PUB** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
DEV ID SOFTWARE **/ PLAYERS** 1

Now that's what we call metal! After the Doom Slayer's volcanic return in 2016, followed by 2020's slightly frostier followup, we've got to ask the obvious question: where does this already over-the-top series go next? Developer Id Software's answer is "Let's go *blorp!*ing mediaeval on the hordes of hell!"

That's right – in this prequel, the Doom Slayer is gearing up with a dark fantasy arsenal. That includes a spiked shield dishing out defence as well as offence, a rad-as-hell skull-crushing projectile weapon, and at one point even a freaking dragon. But despite the presence of this scaly fighter jet, in Dark Ages you're being kept closer to the ground, avoiding the aerial acrobatics of the last two games.

This may sound like a strange design choice for a sequel. In conversation with our sister website GamesRadar, creative director Hugo Martin explained that at

The third Evil Dead took Ash medieval and spawned the line 'This is my boomstick'. An influence on the third reboot Doom?

The dark fantasy vibes make us want to throw up the devil horns now more than ever. All hail the Doom Slayeeer!

the start of developing every fresh Doom he goes back and replays the 1993 classic. His latest revisit threw into starkest relief the difference between the modern and retro movement styles; you couldn't even jump in that very first game, instead having to duck and weave side-to-side through steady waves of projectiles. As such, Dark Ages is tearing a leaf from that dusty, archaic tome (from ye olde '90s), and making the Doom Slayer move much more deliberately while hitting harder than ever before.

NO REST

The Doom Slayer is more powerful than he's ever been – and that's for good reason. Enemies are packed into levels, not quite sardine-like but enough that you're going to need to pummel them with both your right *and* left hands. See, that aforementioned shield isn't *only* a shield, it's also a chainsaw, and it doesn't just block or parry projectiles but can pull double duty to bash plenty of skulls all on its own. It's essential to the new, almost dual-wielding, combat as your constant left-hand companion, offering plenty of opportunities to combo attacks with whatever boomstick you've equipped.

All of this is in addition to other bloody-ridiculous-but-bloody-brilliant gameplay flourishes such as that aforementioned dragon and even a mech suit that make Doom: The Dark Ages look set to go full concept album cover. It's grappling with some big, dark fantasy ideas, for sure, and we hope it will stick the landing – even without movement that shoots for the moon.

This really is the year of the Dragon, at least as far as games are concerned. We can't move for fantasy creatures.

05

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

The heist of the galaxy

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 30 AUG / **PUB** UBISOFT / **DEV** MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT / **PLAYERS** 1

Not everyone gets to double jump all over the place and deflect waves of blaster bolts with seemingly no effort. But though Kay Vess isn't a Jedi – she's more a wheeling and dealing scoundrel like Han Solo or Lando Calrissian – she's still a professional.

Yet she's also no career criminal. Having grown up on the streets with critter pal Nix, she's simply done whatever it took to survive in a galaxy firmly within the Empire's grip (the game is set between The Empire Strikes Back and Return Of The Jedi). When a job goes wrong, it suddenly takes a lot more to survive. After crossing a new yet powerful crime syndicate, Zerek Besh, their boss Sliro is after her head. But the danger also presents an opportunity: the chance to nab a score right from under his nose, one so big that she can win her total freedom. Surely a ticket out of the gutter won't have any kind of caveats, right?

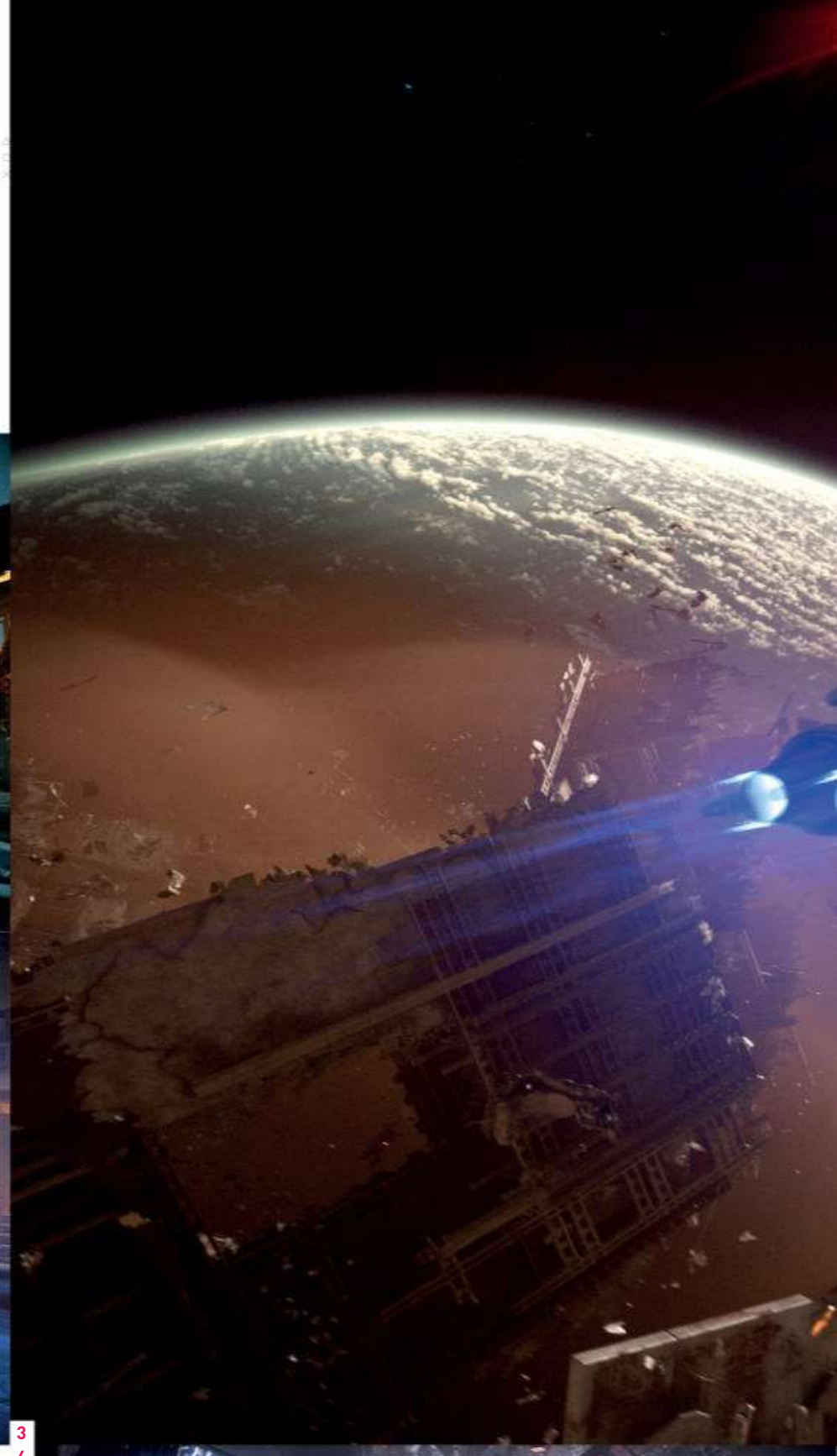
"KAY HAS THE CHANCE TO NAB A SCORE RIGHT FROM UNDER SLIRO'S NOSE, ONE SO BIG THAT SHE CAN WIN HER TOTAL FREEDOM."

NIX THAT

Pulling off the job is going to require honing Kay's skills and expanding her criminal network. Quite how you do this is often left up to you. Outlaws' large open worlds on each planet and the pockets of nearby space are littered with Opportunities, essentially side-quests of varying size from NPCs that can increase her reputation. For example, find a ship from the Pike Syndicate under attack while flying between two planets, and the Syndicate will look favourably on you if you bail them out. While these don't make huge differences to the plot at large, they do affect how some aspects will play out –in particular how you move through spaces controlled by these factions. The spaceport of Mos Eisley on Tatooine, for instance, is controlled by the Hutts. Take the time to help them out and you'll get discounts when shopping, and have an easier time walking the streets. But you're under no obligation if you want to focus on your main missions.

Experts, meanwhile, are important NPCs hidden throughout the galaxy who can advise Kay when it comes to learning new abilities – they are effectively little skill trees in their own right. Tracking experts down is half

Eat your heart out, Nathan Drake. Kay can clamber with the best of them, and plenty of set-pieces will have her narrowly leaping from danger.



1 There are plenty of settlements to explore, providing some welcome respite from adrenaline-raising adventuring around the galaxy. 2 Keep a low profile while you're robbing a criminal syndicate and Kay's reputation with the outfit won't suffer. 3 Kay's ship, the Trailblazer, is more than just a shuttle for getting her from A to B – it's handy in a dogfight too. 4 Neck pain runs rampant in the criminal underworld, meaning using Kay's grapple gun to approach from above or below can work wonders.

» the challenge, clues pointing you in the direction of who to ask. Bram the bartender, for instance, can teach Kay how better to trade blows thanks to his bar-brawling knowledge, or how to fast talk to bamboozle enemies if they become suspicious of your sneaking around, prolonging the time before they go on full alert (and giving you longer to have Nix help you knock 'em out). There are eight or nine experts in total to track down, including a scavenger and a gunslinger.

NOT SO SOLO

As well as finding these optional allies, Kay will have to assemble a crew for the big heist. Chief among the team is the battle-scarred, trenchcoat-wearing droid ND-5. The job itself is orchestrated by Jaylen Vrax, a slick outlaw who looks a tad like the legacy extended universe's Kyle Katarn (a total coincidence, right?). But is his promise of freedom too good to be true? More recruits will have to come on side as well, though it's yet unclear whether this big heist on Zerek Besh will form the whole game or if the storyline will go beyond that. But we expect Kay will face more than a few complications.

In addition to the new faces are plenty of old ones that long-time Star Wars fans will recognise. Many, as you might expect, are connected to the five criminal syndicates that'll feature. Jabba The Hutt, of course, represents the Hutts, and has his usual entourage in tow, like the devious Bib Fortuna and tiny Salacious B. Crumb. (Is it too much to ask for Nix to go one-on-one with the little guy?) Lando has been spotted at a sabacc table (where else?), where you can play the card game for the first time in a videogame. Even Han Solo is here, albeit frozen in carbonite. We doubt this is an alternate timeline, so you won't be saving him – but he does serve as a reminder of how quickly things can go wrong for a scoundrel in the Empire's galaxy.

So far, it seems most syndicates can be allied with, meaning we've not seen a lot of Big Bads aside from Sliro and his criminal goons, as well as the usual stormtroopers. But you can also hurt your rep with those syndicates and make an enemy of them if they catch you meddling in their affairs – so consider keeping a low profile while you do so.

While making enemies of a criminal faction is never ideal, some may prove more dangerous when crossed than others. One in particular, Crimson Dawn, will feature the return of Lady Qi'ra, who climbs the organisation's ranks in spin-off movie Solo. An old flame of Han's, she had to pull herself up from a hard life on the streets, just like Kay. But will this make her a strong ally or someone who knows exactly what it takes to manipulate Kay? Even more dangerous than Qi'ra is the one who's truly pulling the faction's strings: force-sensitive, with a thorny red head, robotic legs, a penchant for chopping people in half, and mastery of the darker side of the galaxy. Okay, their presence in Outlaws isn't confirmed, but we know they're in charge.

SPACE ACE

Ultimately it's up to you how you want to play. Kay's equipment can be customised to support a multitude of playstyles. Most missions, though, do begin with you in stealth mode, and Nix able to assist with takedowns from a distance – you can issue them with simple commands when you highlight interactables. It's not far from Watch Dogs' hacking, just with a critter instead of Wi-Fi.

But from there Outlaws' action is impressively varied. There's camp clearing from a distance, where you can pick enemies off with a scoped blaster. There's zipping around the wilderness on Kay's stumpy-yet-stylish S-57 Cardinal speeder. There are space fights. Bounty hunter battles. Ruins you have to scramble across like a futuristic Nathan Drake. Lockpicking! Miniguns! Explosions! Smuggling!

"WHILE NO SINGLE ELEMENT HERE IS REVOLUTIONARY, WHAT IS IS HOW IN OUTLAWS IT'S ALL SEAMLESSLY MESHED TOGETHER."

While no single element here is revolutionary, what *is* is how in Outlaws it's all seamlessly meshed together, with you moving smoothly between modes. In Outlaws, it feels just as good to pull off a chaotic scrap among the stars as to scramble desperately to haul through an Imperial blockade between two planets and finally touch down in the spaceport on the other side. Few other games can pull off that sense of scale, and while deeper roleplaying systems exist, what's here is easy to intuit and gives you just enough control to get immersed into Kay's journey as your own. Those shifts in scale is what Star Wars is all about, and, importantly, no game based in the setting has ever given you this amount of freedom to explore and adventure. If this weren't Star Wars, it'd still be a rollicking sci-fi quest. But it *is* Star Wars, and it's inviting fans like us along for a ride like we've never taken before.

Swann is a loner – but that's all right. What will you discover beyond the viewfinder of her camcorder in the summer of 1995?

04

LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE

Best summer ever?

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** EARLY 2025 **PUB** DON'T NOD / **DEV** DON'T NOD / **PLAYERS** 1

The course of teen friendship seldom runs smooth – even without a supernatural secret threatening to detonate your group dynamic. The original developer of Life Is Strange, Don't Nod, is back with an all-new teen drama crafted by its Montreal studio. It's a departure in many ways, not least because this project doubles up on protagonists. Michel Koch, game director and studio director of Don't Nod Montreal, jokes, "It's hard to make a game about four characters, and sometimes I'm asking myself the question, 'Why didn't we [stick with] two?'"

Lost Records will be released in two parts, about a month apart, following a gang of girls either side of a 27-year gap. *Something* supernatural happens in the summer of '95, causing the group to forge a pact to never speak again – until they have to in 2022.

Something in the real world shook up how we communicate in the spring of 2020 too, and Koch reveals that this global event was part of the creative impetus behind the game.

"[We first began to develop these characters] right at the beginning of the pandemic, when everybody was isolated," he says. "We were starting to miss those moments when we were seeing our friends at the bar, [or] in meetings, and we [were] just talking by Teams or Zoom. So I think that this idea of community, of group friendship – it was important for us, and we really wanted to challenge ourselves to create a game around this rather than [returning] to the comfort [zone of] two characters."

LEADER OF THE PACK

You are Swann, a teen girl who is generally happy living in her own little bubble. While introspective protagonists are common in Don't Nod's games, the developers' goal was to do something different, making her a "'positive introvert' rather than just being shy for the sake of being shy." In a similar vein, her dialogue options are a little quirky; Swann can be blunt as she says "what [she thinks] instead of overthinking everything."

Koch underlines, "Swann is really fine by herself just walking in the

"I THINK THAT THIS IDEA OF COMMUNITY, OF GROUP FRIENDSHIP – IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR US."

woods, filming the outskirts of Velvet Cove with a camcorder."

Swann is documenting her hometown before her family moves to Vancouver at the summer's end. However, her video memoir project enjoys a plot twist when she first meets Walkman-toting music-lover Kat, then gets close to long-time besties Nora and Autumn. "It's a game about group dynamics," Koch says, later elaborating, "What is your position within a group? Who do you get close to, who do you get *closest* to? How do you find your space within a group of friends where there are already some dynamics?"

AWKWARD DUCKLING

Koch says, "I think we have all had situations like that – like, you have a good friend and then you have new friends that come into a group. [We wanted to explore] how does this create new dynamics, new balance, new tension?"

Monitoring this push and pull is a relationship tracking system. To be clear, you can't speedrun falling out with each member of the group; this system instead tracks the nuanced ways in which Swann's friendships can bloom over time. Koch explains, "We really are [exploring] how close are you getting to each other: do you just stay on the friend level? Or do you go to Best Friends or even deeper to have a stronger relationship? Sometimes maybe even a romantic relationship with some of them."

Throughout, Swann has a wealth of choices when it comes to choosing how to portray herself to the group.

"She has been used to being perfectly fine by herself for so many [years], that finding new friends and having this kind of friendship-at-first-sight moment with them really changes her day-to-day dynamic," Koch elaborates, "And [puts] her and the player in situations [like] 'Oh, how do I navigate this newfound friendship? Do I try to look cooler than I am? Or do I just say who I really am? Do I lie to try to impress them? By talking about topics that I have no idea what I'm talking about? Or do I be just genuinely who I am and risk appearing boring to them?'"

We can't wait to become the drama early next year.

03

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

Presenting protagonist double trouble

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 15 NOV **/ PUB** UBISOFT
DEV UBISOFT QUEBEC **/ PLAYERS** 1

Don't call it a comeback - after all, Assassin's Creed never really went away. However, for the next game, set in Sengoku-era Japan, Ubisoft has already announced its commitment to series hallmarks we've not seen in years. For a start, if you're a fan of 2015's Syndicate, you'd better prick up your ears now: not only will Shadows focus on a duo no doubt soon to be just as iconic as that game's, it'll let you pick your approach for specific missions.

Samurai Yasuke, one of two playable protagonists, is a departure from series tradition in that he's based on an actual historical figure. We don't know much about the Yasuke of history beyond the fleeting 15 months he spent as a retainer under the powerful feudal lord Oda Nobunaga, but here he's imagined as a principled young man who's far from content to stand back and watch when faced with an abuse of power.

In Shadows, the cracks etched into Yasuke's armour are testament to many hard battles won. Playing as the samurai offers military might but, it perhaps goes without saying, few opportunities for stealth. Yasuke enjoys quite the arsenal, including an attention-grabbing kanabo, a spiked metal club which proves particularly devastating against armoured foes. Surprisingly, in one-on-one duels it proves as useful for guarding against incoming blows as for shattering helmets. After softening up enemies, you can then go in for the kill with an assortment of blades, from katana swords to naginata polearms.

Interestingly, Yasuke's impressive arsenal does *not* include an assassin's signature weapon: the wrist-mounted hidden blade.

NAOE PROBLEMS

Yasuke is not alone in his pursuit of justice; the other half of this duo is Naoe, a shinobi who stalks her revenge from the shadows with the assassins' weapon of choice secreted up her sleeve.

In pursuit of a vassal lord who has been terrorising nearby townspeople with his own surly samurai, the pair get a tip that corners the feudal menace in his

Play your way through an impeccably researched historical-fiction vision of 16th-century Japan.

castle. We have a choice how we tackle him: we *could* go in loud, smashing our way through the front door as Yasuke… or we could take the subtler approach as Naoe.

As daylight dwindles, Naoe has the advantage. Perched atop a roof, she surveys the area for enemies before picking her moment and grappling into action. After skewering a lone guard when she lands within the castle grounds, she quickly presses herself to the wall and peeks around the corner – unluckily for that guardsmen, no-one's coming running. Carefully inching her way towards her target, Naoe tries to keep kills to the absolute minimum, only taking out whoever else is ill-fated enough to stand in her way.

Flinging shuriken and kunai to extinguish light and life in equal measure, Naoe creeps forward. Eventually she eavesdrops upon a hard-to-miss tirade from the target himself, berating his staff for serving his tea improperly. Oh, this guy is going *down*. To get the drop on him, Naoe crawls into a pond, breathing through a reed to conceal her presence as she swims into position. The target is being watched not only by his pleading servant, but also quite a lot of muscle – still, this is the best chance she'll get.

"WE COULD SMASH OUR WAY THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR AS YASUKE… OR TAKE THE SUBTLER APPROACH AS NAOE."

Naoe erupts from the water, cutting the lord down and immediately drawing all eyes. Three on one is hardly fair, but Naoe has a kusarigama (a small sickle on a chain) for just such lively occasions. Whirling the blade around herself keeps the crowd at bay and swiftly chops the bolder combatants (plus some nearby bamboo) down to size. In the confusion, she legs it back into the dark. After clambering up walls, running along rooftops, and at one point even hurling herself out of a castle window, Naoe is home free. There's no doubt Yasuke's version of this mission would've been more direct, but you can't make a more efficient exit than that!

02

LEGO HORIZON ADVENTURES

Bricks and stones may break robo dino bones

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** LATE 2024 **/ PUB** SONY **/ DEV** GUERRILLA GAMES, GOBO STUDIOS **/ PLAYERS** 1-2

Venture forth with a fresh, brick-by-brick perspective!

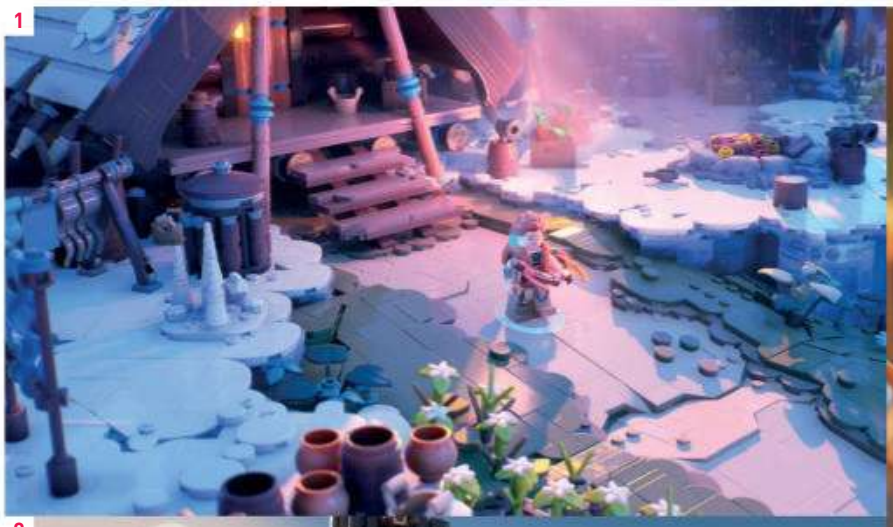
We can never pass up the chance to play with some Lego, especially when it's PlayStation itself asking. Going hands-on with a slew of other titles, we're struck by the decor of the booth we're beckoned into – the walls of the first floor tactfully lined with mini murals documenting the history of PlayStation ending in 2020 with the release of PS5. Oh, how things have changed since then…

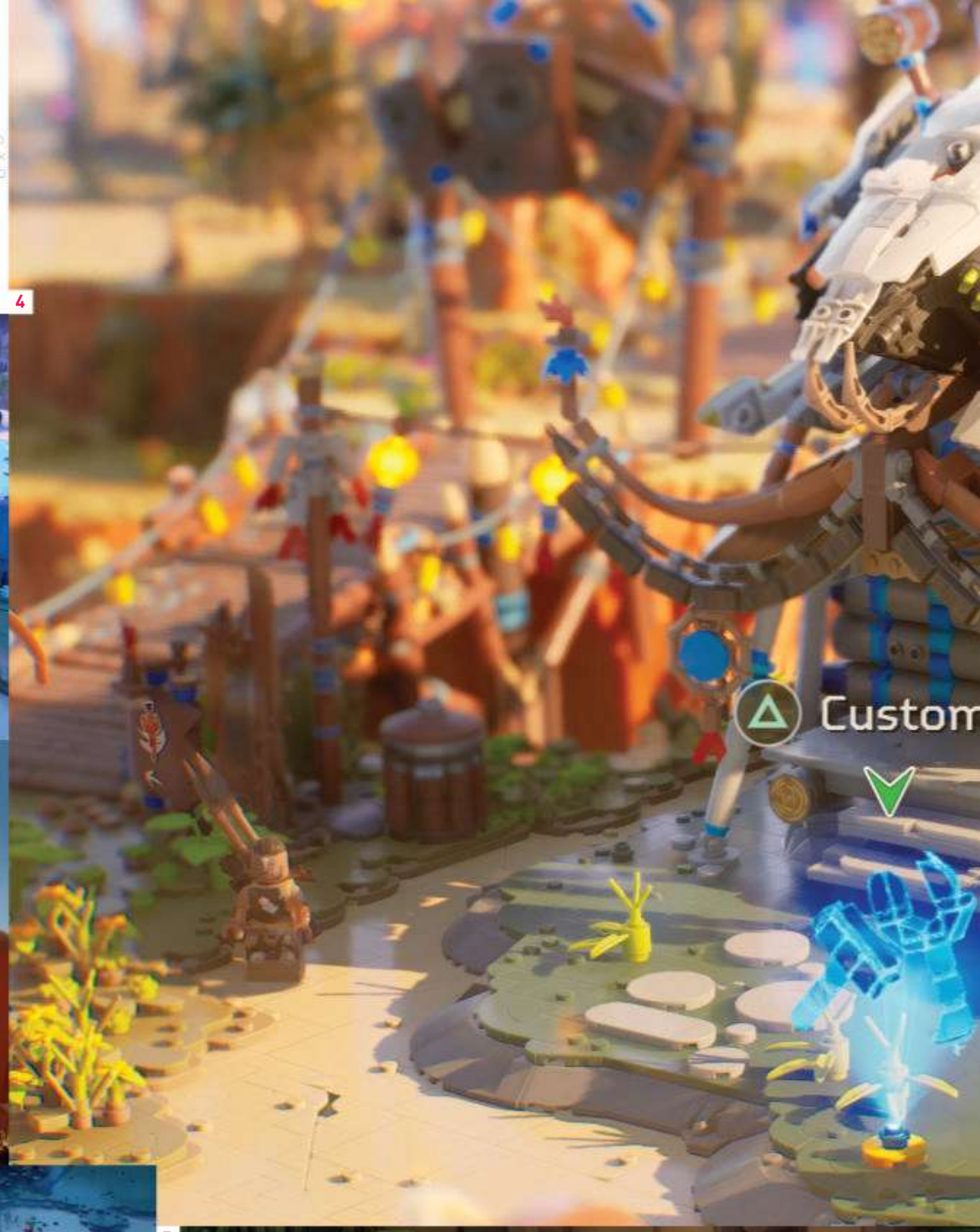
Four years on from the console's launch, we live in a world where a small indie hit like Helldivers can lead to a bigger-budget sequel that becomes one of PlayStation's fastest-selling games ever; where first-party games are launched on both PC and rival console platforms on day one; and where we get to meet a Lego-fied Aloy alongside a much more family-friendly version of the Nora tribe.

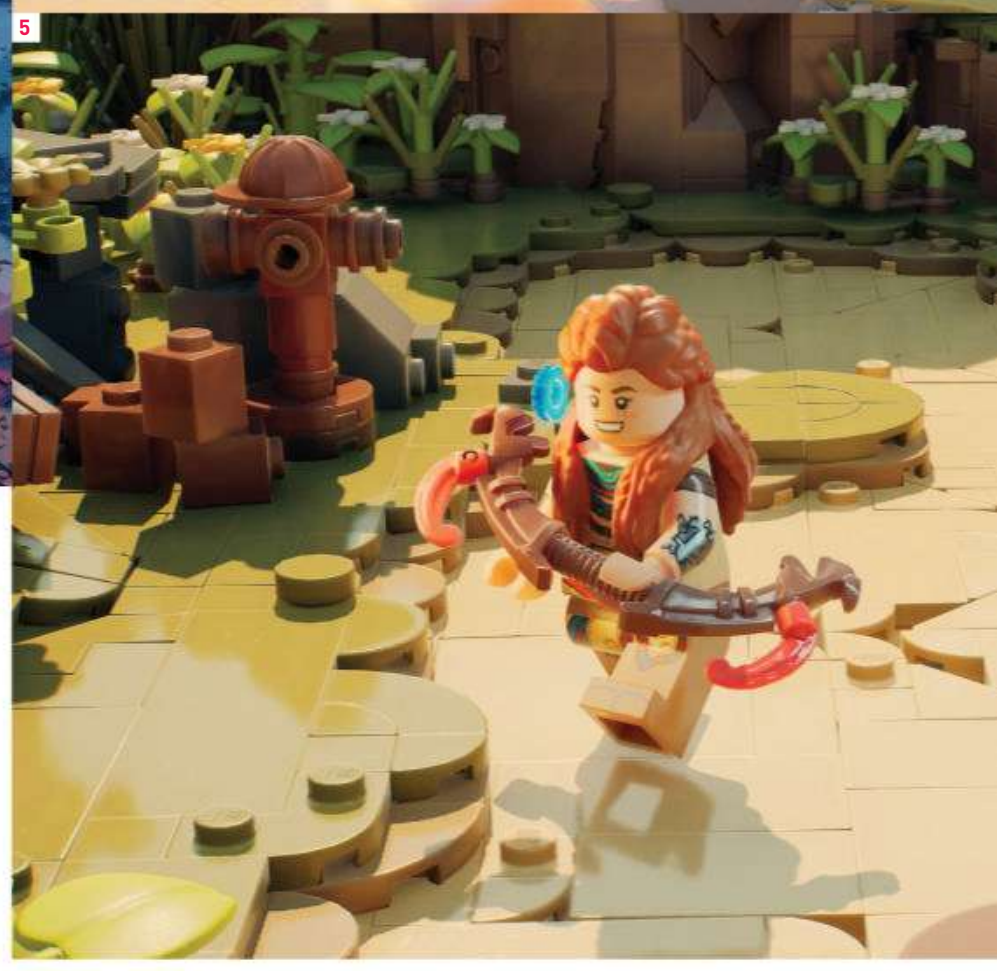
BACK TO ZERO

Two things stick out when you start playing Lego Horizon Adventures. First, this is not an entirely new story created just for young players – instead, it's a retelling of Horizon Zero Dawn in the Lego house style, which means slapstick comedy and lower stakes. While this sounds like an interesting »

"LEGO HORIZON ADVENTURES' WORLD IS ENTIRELY MADE OUT OF BRICKS."







1 The world might be different but Aloy still needs her bow and arrow. 2 Please take our money and turn this Thunderjaw into a real-life Lego set! 3 Aloy might not have a double jump in her own games, but in Lego anything is possible. 4 The story has been retooled to make Mother's Heart more of a home base... with a hotdog van. 5 Teamwork makes the dream work.

» setup, we can't help but wonder how certain, darker, story elements will be handled.

Longtime Lego steward TT Games became really good at translating moments of drama into humorous versions – for instance, Boromir's final scene in Lego The Lord Of The Rings sees him felled by a bow loaded with a banana. Even Lego Star Wars manages to take the high ground when it comes to Anakin Skywalker's dismemberment at the hands of Obi-Wan Kenobi. However, the frequently dour post-post-apocalypse of Horizon, the world-ending implications of the story, and the existence of a tribe that kidnaps the Nora in order to enslave them will make it a challenge to lend Lego charm to certain story elements.

Towards the end of our hands-on, Aloy sees Elisabet Sobeck for the first time and the HADES program is "explained," but Aloy's suspicious similarity to Sobeck is played for laughs here, while the projection showing the HADES program gives it a silly, scary face. These are sensible changes to prevent kids from getting nightmares, but it is tonally jarring to see such serious moments turned into Lego goof.

TILT SHIFT

During our hour-long hands-on, it becomes clear that this is a fully fledged experience with high production values, as we'd expect. A lot of recent Lego games have looked nice; with Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga and Lego Builder's Journey developers TT Games and Light Brick Studio respectively did particularly good jobs of digitising bricks in such a way that they still feel like tangible objects. Even so, Horizon Adventures could end up being a technical showpiece for PS5.

The way water, represented here by translucent blue bricks, refracts light looks lifelike to anyone who has messed around with real Lego.

It's unlike a lot of TT Games' Lego adventures, where the environments were normal videogame textures with Lego blocks and mini sets found within – this world is entirely made out of bricks. Trees, the ground, water, everything could have been constructed out of Lego – if you had *a lot* of time and access to a never-ending Pick-A-Brick.

Somewhat interestingly, though, we learn that despite being co-developed by Guerrilla Games, Lego Horizon Adventures *won't* be running on that studio's in-house Decima engine. Instead of using the same tech as the first two Horizon games and Hideo Kojima's Death Stranding, Horizon Adventures will run on Unreal Engine 5. This is most likely owing to the involvement of non-Sony co-development team Studio Gobo and the time it would take to get its staff up to speed on in-house tools.

"BATTLES ARE LITTERED WITH GADGETS LIKE BLAST BOOTS AND GRAVITY BOMBS."

STUD-U-LIKE

While we expect good looks, we can't help but be surprised by how good Horizon Adventures feels to play. Part of this is thanks to truly impressive animation work that gives plenty of personality to Aloy and Varl (it's unclear if there will be other companions) as they bop up and down through the isometric world like minifigures being moved by a kid around their kitchen table.

Much like in the mainline games, Lego Horizon's action is built around ranged combat. Each character has a primary weapon; Aloy has her bow and arrow, while Varl flings a spear. When you're out in the world you can hide in long grass and scan machines for weak points which you can then attack for extra damage, again, like in the main series. There don't appear to be any stealth takedowns, so after scanning every encounter gets loud and chaotic.

And we mean *very* chaotic. While machines will charge at you and fling projectiles your way, Aloy and co can also use their surroundings to their advantage. The example we are shown involves shooting your main attack through a bonfire so your arrow/spear catches alight and deals extra damage on impact. On top of this, the battle is littered with gadgets like blast boots that give you an extra jump and gravity bombs that suck in enemies. Some of these items are single-use while others are on a cooldown, but they're plentiful during our hands-on so we use them at every opportunity. This does mean things can get a little too helter-skelter; we do find ourselves getting lost on screen amid the explosion of bricks and particle effects during more hectic fights.

Fortunately this problem can be mitigated in the full release thanks to a plethora of customisation options. While there will, of course, be plenty of Horizon characters to choose from, there will also be minifigs from other Lego brands like Lego City, with all the firefighters and astronauts those sets entail. Horizon Adventures will also let you modify individual parts to create custom minifigures. It remains to be seen if any other PlayStation characters might be unlockable, but we aren't getting our hopes up for a Lego Helghast Soldier or Clicker.

For Lego fans, it's fun to theorise about potential future Lego/PlayStation collaborations off the back of Horizon Adventures. While the Lego Tallneck set is awesome, it still feels like a one-off, but with Lego's continued investment in more complex adult sets, and this game being proof that not only do Lego and Sony have a good relationship but first-party devs are excited to make different kinds of game using the Lego framework, it's hard not to get excited. Even if Lego Horizon Adventures isn't for you, it still looks like a solid family game, and heralds an exciting new relationship for PlayStation.

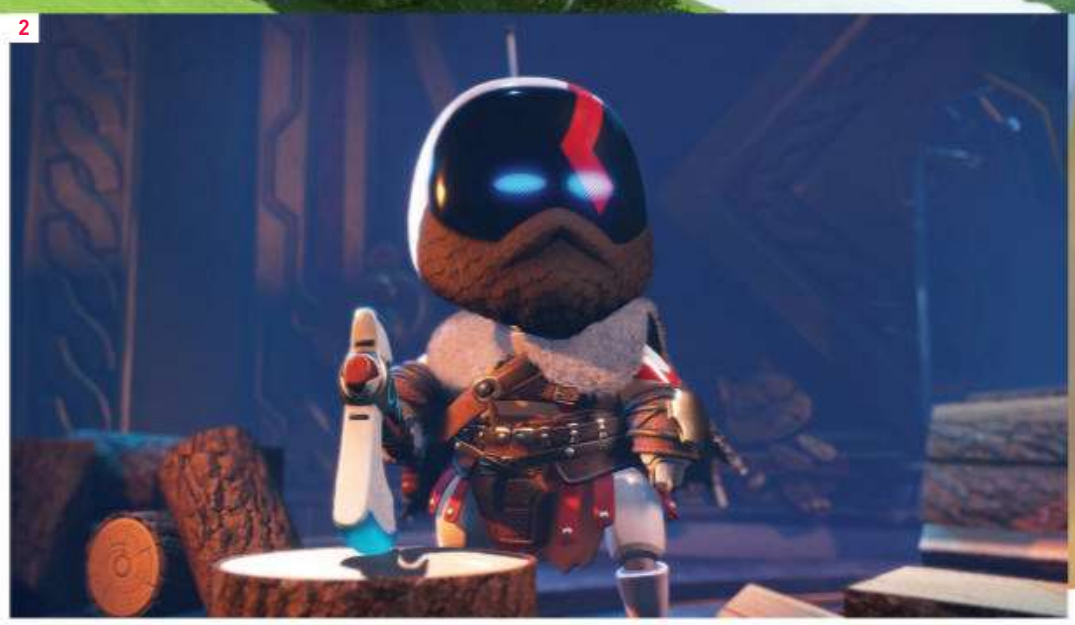
01 ASTRO BOT

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 6 SEP **/ PUB** SONY **/ DEV** TEAM ASOBI **/ PLAYERS** 1

There's a starman, waiting on PS5

Fun fact: when attending big showcases, invitations to go hands-on don't always say what games you'll be playing. Usually, because they haven't yet been properly announced. Which had us umming and ahhing about what Mystery Sony Game was going to actually be. Top of our most-wanted list though, was Astro Bot. It's never felt better to be right.

The gang's all here! Decades of PlayStation legacy add colour to what's a terrific platformer in its own right.



1 We're not sure if Ratchet is in distress because he's tied to a tree or because he probably won't get a new game for a while. 2 The God of Awwww He's So Cute! 3 The froggy gloves are one of your power-ups, making great use of the DualSense's haptic triggers. 4 Bosses often have multiple stages and phases.

The game has long been rumoured to be in development, ever since Team Asobi, the developer of PS5 pack-in Astro's Playroom, was spun out of the shuttered Japan Studio. The PS5 launch game was so much fun we still find ourselves booting it up to noodle around its stages and be reminded of the console's full potential – which many others still can't touch. Yet, as a free title, it's short but sweet. Can the concept even carry a full-length release? So far, this bot is bobbing his head up and down: yes, absolutely.

HE'S A REAL BOT

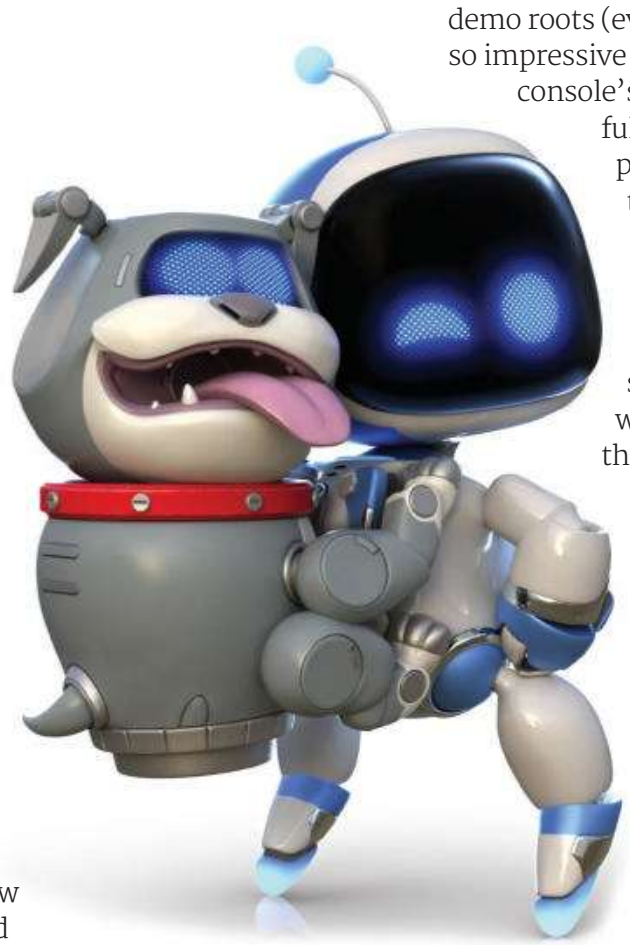
In fact, we're more confident in our love of the new robo PlayStation mascot than ever. When announced at the PlayStation State Of Play, the game was the star of the show – it has shot up preorder lists. What's more, just as we left our own session with the game abuzz with excitement, a revolving door of other peers who also had time with the game felt the same – it's all anyone wants to talk about. Comparisons to rival mascot platformers are often part of those conversations, but in this case lil' technician Astro Bot feels as good to control through his opening stages, if not better, than his premium plumber competition.

"ASTRO BOT FEELS AS GOOD TO CONTROL THROUGH THE OPENING STAGES, IF NOT BETTER, THAN HIS PREMIUM PLUMBER COMPETITION."

It's impossible to avoid falling in love with the game, thanks in part to the infectious way it celebrates PlayStation's legacy. But far from being anchored to the past, Astro feels wonderfully modern. With a moveset much the same as he had

in Playroom, the mini robot's tight controls make it easier to hop and hover across levels. Impressive visuals add a lush layer to digital foundations (Astro and friends literally come from *inside* your console), and even slathered in enemies, physics objects, and special effects it maintains a smooth 60fps – vital for platforming bliss.

Core to the vibe is a score similar to the sonic phenomenon that gave Astro's Playroom so much life, courtesy of composer Kenneth Young (who you may recognise from his work on Media Molecule games like LittleBigPlanet and Tearaway). All this, paired with often adorable, always expressive, animations for enemies and Astro alike, make the worlds we visit feel even more alive.



BEYOND TECH DEMO

But what's most impressive is how Astro Bot feels like a fully-fledged videogame now – it's growing beyond Astro's Playroom's tech demo roots (even though that was so impressive it became one of the console's greatest exclusives, full stop). The demo we play has five levels: two traditional ones similar to Playroom, one boss stage, one speedrun stage, and a second, secret, speedrun stage that we find hidden within the overworld.

That top-layer overworld is a bit of a playground itself, and gives us a hint of just how much bigger an experience Astro Bot will be when it's released. Levels are collected into galaxies, with what appear to be bosses in each. With six galaxies in the game at launch (and more to come as free DLC), there will be over 80 levels to blast through.

That makes it over four times bigger than Astro's Playroom, but in addition to having more stages it feels more impressive in scope. In each level we play, we come across several unique power-ups and abilities, including a jet-powered Astro-Dog we strap to our back for a boost. We also scoop up an Astro-Octopus that lets us suck up water and spit it out to jump higher or glide slowly down to the ground. On top of that, we're drawn to a magnetic power-up that enables us to gather metal into big balls that we can then toss at enemies or use to break glass walls. Our favourite power-up is the Astro-Frog boxing gloves, which we use during a boss fight to pummel a giant octopus before meeting Astro-Kratos and Astro-Atreus. This bot has one illustrious family.

Each of these temporary upgrades feels great in the hands,

1

exploiting the DualSense's tech in a different way – for example, the froggy gloves make great use of the haptic triggers. And the real magic isn't just in the variety of your kit, but in the range of challenges you can tackle with it – so while you can use the magnet to break glass or send enemies packing, you can also use it to hit targets that then cause additional platforms to swing into place. Many of the power-ups have multiple uses like this, giving them a versatile edge. As well as coming in handy for whacking foes, the boxing gloves' spring-loaded mechanisms enable you to swing from platform to platform. Nobody puts botty in a corner!

Even the fight with the giant octopus boss impresses us with the number of different attack patterns we're expected to dance around, each barrage from the eight-legged monster featuring killer character animations that convey a lot of personality – at one point mid-fight, the tentacular threat leans in to take a good look at Astro Bot with one of his blackened eyes. More than just an arena battle, this showdown evolves as the octopus attempts to flee once we've given it a heaped piece of our mind. We then have to platform our way through a flood of floating obstacles, buoyed by tidal waves, before we can reach the final round with our many-limbed rival.

"THE REAL MAGIC ISN'T JUST IN THE VARIETY OF THE POWER-UPS, BUT IN THE RANGE OF CHALLENGES YOU CAN TACKLE WITH THEM."

Each of the six galaxies appears to be built around rescuing and recruiting a particular PlayStation mascot. In addition to the Astro-Kratos and Astro-Atreus we befriend here, we've seen teases of Nathan Drake-Bot, Astro-Aloy, a bunch of LocoRoco-Bots, and an Ape Escape-themed mission, with the Ape-bots all gathered around a console. Might these be all the story-critical bots? And if so, does that mean we're finally getting a new Ape Escape? (We can dream.)

A LOVE OF THE GAME[S]

The game will definitely feature loads more characters from throughout PlayStation's colourful history, besides Astro's crew. Spanning first- and third-party releases, they're scattered in almost every nook and cranny in each level. We spy two different lombaxes (Ratchet and Rivet), Jumping-Flash!-inspired Astro-Frogs, the Traveller from Journey, the young

1 While games are brighter now than they were in the neutral noughties, this is still impressively colourful. 2 Is that a chicken on Astro's back? 3 A casino-themed world. Don't need luck when you've got skill. 4 Astro Bot is small, but he's got boss-sized personality.

boy from Ico, PaRappa The Rapper *and* Um Jammer Lammy, and Wander, The Maiden, and Agro from Shadow Of The Colossus.

But that's not all. As well as the standard levels, in our hands-on we get to play through two surprisingly difficult challenge levels in which Astro Bot has only one life. These are reminiscent of the speedrun levels from Astro's Playroom, and we'd be surprised if the game doesn't feature leaderboard action in a similar capacity – chasing times with friends is always fun… as long as we're winning.

We might not have long to wait to find out for sure – September is just around the corner – but it speaks to Astro Bot's quality that it's painful to be typing this rather than playing the game right now. All we want to do is sit down and play the rest, jumping, leaping, swinging, and jetting throughout PlayStation history (and then running it back to improve our times).

While nostalgia is certainly part of the joy, our itchy DualSense fingers speak to the element that's absolutely core to Astro Bot's appeal. Even if you were to strip out all the PlayStation references, Astro Bot would still have delightful blue skies, a toe-tapping soundtrack, and some of the tightest platforming we've seen this side of the console generation. It puts a smile on your face. It's great to see a positive, fun-for-all-ages game reach such heights, and be treated as the showpiece it deserves to be. A shame though it may be that the approach has become something of a rarity, that hasn't stopped Astro Bot. And in truth, we're not sure anything could. ■

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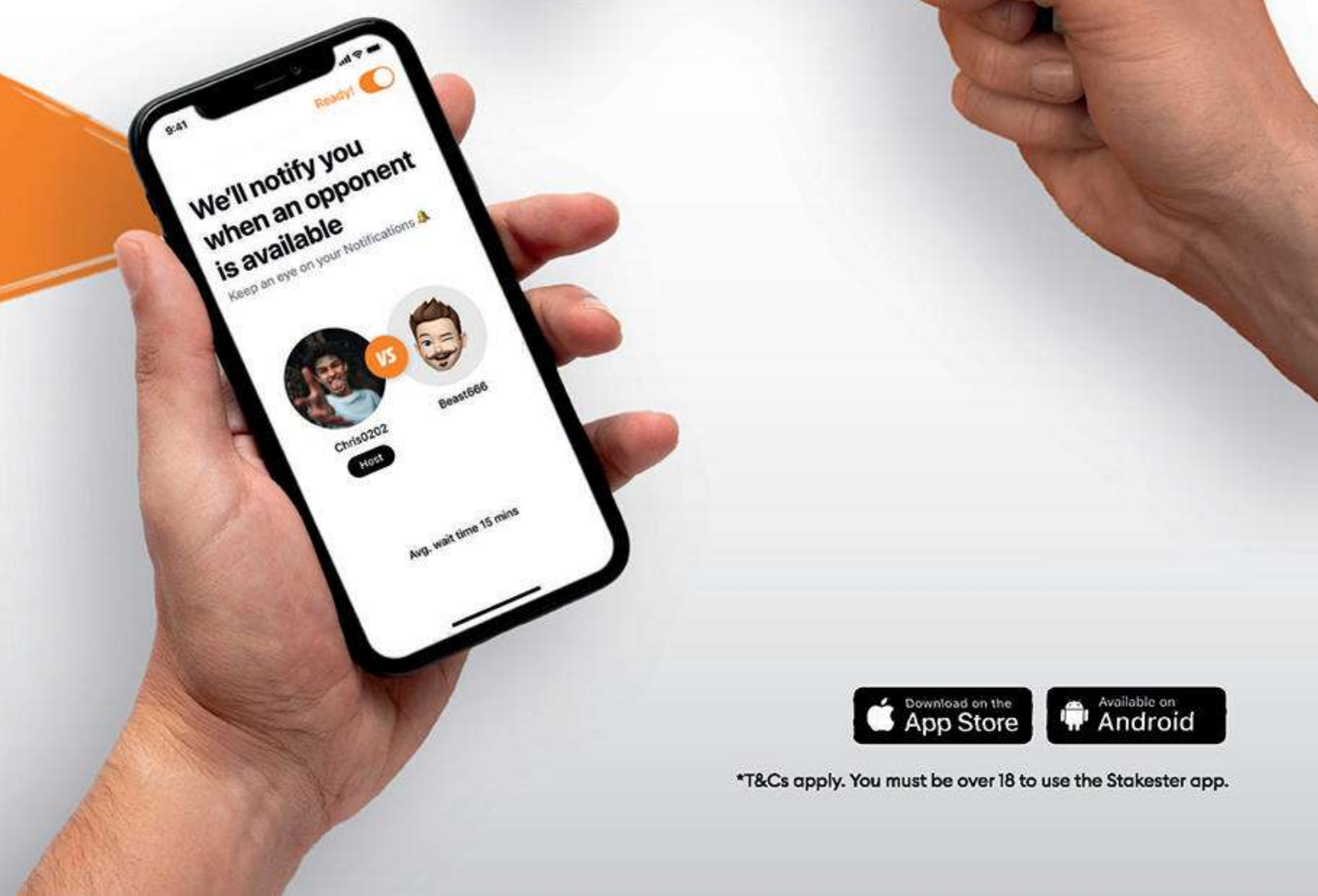

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Reviews

"TIME TO PARALYSE DEMON KINGS WITH YOUR CHARMS."

084 Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance

090 Still Wakes The Deep

You're trying to survive, but the game is rigged

HIGHLIGHTS

DESTINY 2: THE FINAL SHAPE 088 | ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE 092 | ARRANGER 094
ALAN WAKE 2: NIGHT SPRINGS 095 | THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS THROUGH DAYBREAK 096
THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE: GOLD ROAD 098 | SUSHI BEN 100 | V RISING 101

EDITOR'S AWARD
PLAY

Shin Megami Tensei V: Vengeance

A delightfully devilish refresh

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed) PS4
PRICE £54.99
ETA Out now
PUB Sega
DEV Atlus
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 50-60 hrs per playthrough
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; auto-battle; casual/safety difficulties; numerous quality of life options; can save anywhere

Beginning in the back of a Tokyo school classroom, you meet your classmates before heading home to your dorm, navigating an overworld of urban streets as a revolving cursor pointer. It's comfortable bread-and-butter for the series, if wheat were Persona and milk old-school SMT. It's a cheeky setup that positions things just right for a picnic blanket rug-pull, sending that sandwich flying and opening up those slices to a whole new realm: SMT goes open world. And it's really good.

Everything breaks bad when a detour home under an old bridge hurls you through the veil barely holding your reality together. You come outside into an unfamiliar Tokyo, with ruined skyscrapers, sand dunes rolling over the streets, and demons frolicking amid the destruction. The only way you'll survive is by joining hands with a strange being that takes the form of a handsome older man, Aogami, to fuse into one being: a Nahobino.

THRONING UP

The setup remains the same in both of the stories here, the Canon Of Creation (the original storyline, first released on Switch), and the Canon Of Vengeance. Either way, while your allies, enemies, and even the maps you explore change, they all revolve around your mere existence. The Nahobino is an ancient symbol of divinity, one who simply by existing has the right to sit on the throne – empty after an off-screen, apocalyptic assassination – and reshape the world. It's up to you to navigate the battle to claim it, as pantheons clash.

As is often the case in SMT, you ally with demons as much as you smush them into next week, fusing them together and levelling them up to reach new devilish heights. Usually you'd also be doing abstract overworld exploration and grindy, corridor-heavy dungeon crawling – but not in SMT V, which reinvents exploration, enlarging its scope.

Pantheons clash for control. Odin here is head of the Norse one, and a rival of Zeus.

Simply by existing as the Nahobino, you have the right to sit on the throne.

1 As you'd probably expect, Loki is a master magician, making for a tough fight. Get him on side, however, and he's invaluable for striking weaknesses to gain you extra turns. **2** You miss 100% of the hands you don't take – divinity might be a connection away. **3** The Vengeance storyline adds more character interactions, and a newcomer, Yoko. But how will her angsty pot-stirring affect the rest of the team?

Dungeoneering is so minimised here that there are only three dungeons in the game (two per route), plus they're all rather breezy. Unravelling Tokyo's open world districts (five in total, four per route) is the bulk of the experience. You see almost every demon encounter coming, with many fiends wandering the map. Sometimes figuring out how to proceed is part of the challenge, as you worm across broken highways and poke around caverns. High-level, hulking foes sometimes stomp around a chosen patch of home turf.

It's wonderfully refreshing; discovering hidden Miman demons and unearthing shortcut grind rails back to checkpoints feels as rewarding as winning a boss battle. Even though each district is split into smaller sections connected by corridors (a hallmark of the game's origins on Switch, no doubt), picking them apart is moreish as you stuff experience points and relics (like manga and oden) into the pockets of your ethereal blue bodysuit.

FIEND LIST

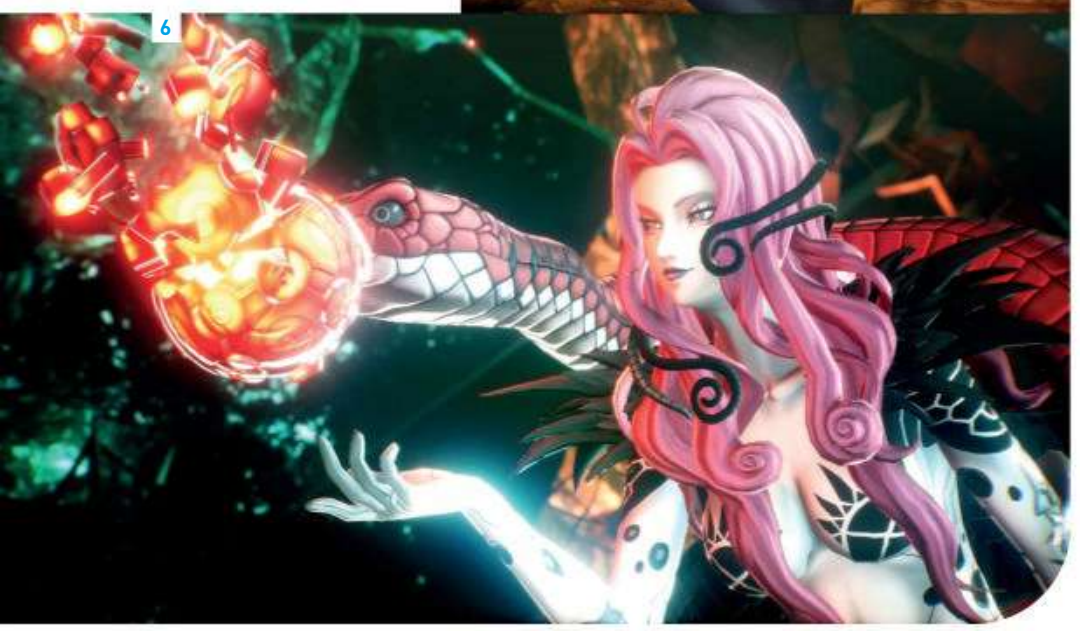
Side-quests, often centring on demons' quirky personalities, keep things interesting on the road. They offer genuinely tangible rewards, like new demon party members (often very powerful for when you find them). They can also teach you a bit about myth and religion – one standout being a series of requests to aid in the familial dispute between African deities Onyankopon and Anansi.

The Nahobino is a bit of a blank slate story- and stats-wise, though the new Essence system helps out with the latter. Essence can be collected from any demon, or the corpses of versions of Aogami that didn't survive the netherworld, and can be used to apply skills to yourself or any demon (elemental resistances can only be applied to yourself) – as long as it's not a skill particular to that specific demon (of which there are many, all boasting cool animations). Every party member is essentially a canvas for you to turn into your weapon of choice, though you'll want to save your rarer Essences for special occasions, naturally.

Persona fans may be surprised to see plus and minus marks next to skills and affinities. These indicate how well-attuned demons are to certain types of skill, boosting power and efficiency. Each can only have so many skills, so it's important to make the most of them. Tough boss battles can be real headscratchers, but as much as they can ruin your day with debuffs and ailments, you too can employ those strategies. Yes: it's time to paralyse demon kings with your charms.

With lots of stock to supplement your four on-field party members (each of whom can be switched out at will), you'll have assembled a crack team of the best of the best by the time you near the throne. As many boss demons can also be summoned once you've bested them, it's satisfying to bring them on side and build up those relationships, which in turn offer opportunities to learn even more skills and boost stats. This all comes together in the Demon

While bosses can ruin your day with debuffs and ailments, you too can employ those strategies.



4 Dodge demons to tackle abscesses directly and earn big upgrades. 5 The Jacks' special attacks debuff as well as deal damage. 6 Each Qadištu is a tricky boss with unique mechanics that'll flatten you if you don't watch for them.

Haunt where you can chat with them in quiet moments, slathered in personality, with uniquely off-the-wall dialogue for each demon. Who knew Girimekhala was so funny and down-to-earth? And that Aitvaras would be so outspoken about omelettes?

CREATE OR DESTROY

Even with a unique map and dungeon, each route isn't quite different enough to make a fresh playthrough absolutely essential (though you can carry a lot across through two types of New Game+). Creation is story-light even for an SMT game, though it does allow you the widest choice of endings, and features our fave map: the war-torn Chiyoda.

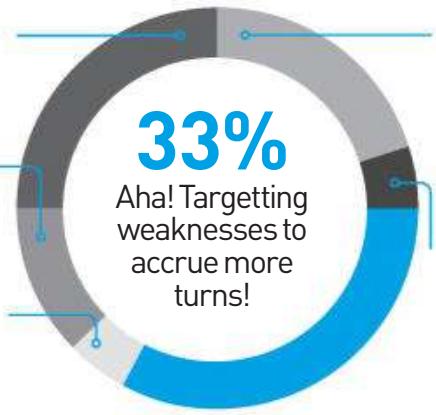
In comparison Vengeance's new map, Shinagawa, is too sprawling for its own good, and the new dungeon's gimmick doesn't add much (but they're not warps, at least – finally, an SMT with *no* warp dungeons!). However, new character Yoko is a great addition to the cast as an angsty moraliser, and the way human allies can join you in battle throughout Vengeance gives you some optional tactical training wheels, making for an easier on-ramp (especially for those put off by how much crunchier SMT is than Persona). Vengeance's compelling villains are the stars, though, especially witchy coven Qadištu; these four black magic women are not just strong designs visually, but mechanically too, making mastering them once you're done just as compelling. We can't dispel the urge to get back in the lab and fuse more demons: SMT… it's alive!

Still not as slick as Persona, SMT V revels in crunchtastic strategy with unparalleled customisation. A shift to open world is a genuine fresh hook. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: SMT V: VENGEANCE



25% Picking apart the maze-like worlds and finding secrets.

12% Fusing the perfect demon, and getting your skills just right.

5% Deftly dodging enemies on the world map. Not today, Satan!

20% Oh no! Getting hit by your own weaknesses and destroyed by enemies.

5% Shoving ancient soda into your bodysuit's pockets for money.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

YOKO HIROMINE
Why was she sealed away, and to what degree does she shape Vengeance?

GUSTAVE
Craves human relics, and will sell you handy items in return for vending machine runs.

MIYAZU ATSUTA
Has caught the interest of the Egyptian pantheon – but to what end?

HOW TO… PICK YOUR ROUTE

You decide at the very beginning of the game which route you want to play – and a tooltip makes it extra clear. Most of Creation's endings can be picked towards the end of the game; Vengeance's are based on your responses in conversation throughout the game.

SECOND OPINION STEALING THIS LOOK

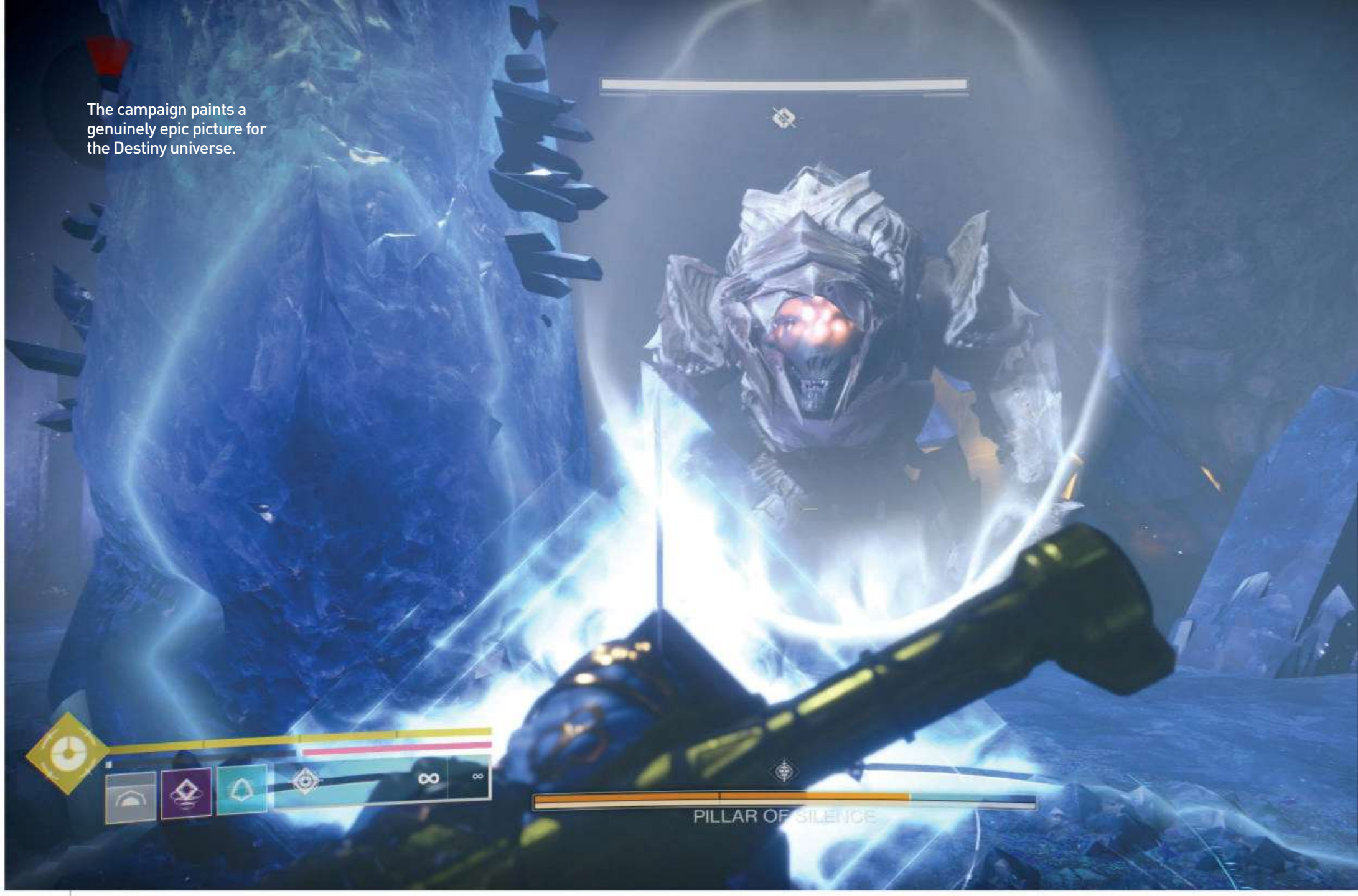
Canon Of Vengeance escapes Creation's first-draft-feeling by offering a whisper more characterisation, plus a new cast member. Story remains a light touch, but what keeps me coming back is something I never thought I'd see in SMT: open world exploration. Moving through this netherworld is surprisingly slick. And then there's Vengeance's banging soundtrack, and sense of style… **Jess Kinghorn**

IS IT BETTER THAN?

Truly close, but with more demons and skills, plus a more open world, SMT V: V beats SMT III: R.

P5 Royal's lengthy story trumps SMT V: V's two. Slick level design makes it tighter than an open world.

Soul Hackers 2 has some neat twists of its own, but it's built on a much safer, blander foundation.



The campaign paints a genuinely epic picture for the Destiny universe.

Destiny 2: The Final Shape

Rather than give up the Ghost, this keeps the spirit strong

This particular Bungie jump has a lot of weight to carry. Destiny players have slowly but surely been growing weary of the grind in recent years, and Lightfall lacked the punch necessary to completely knock things back into, well… shape. One delayed expansion later, Destiny looks healthy again, thanks largely to a huge amount of fan service.

How much you'll get out of this is directly proportional to how invested you are in Destiny's history and lore. While this may sound obvious, it's more true of The Final Shape than any expansion before it. The story has allies and enemies old and new, resolutions and heated exchanges fuelled by personal histories, and shots at emotional moments that only have a chance of hitting if you know the characters involved like old friends.

Still, if you *are* interested in The Final Shape, it's unlikely you're entirely unfamiliar with all that has come before. You'll also be pleased to hear that Keith David proves himself the only person who could possibly have replaced the sadly departed Lance Reddick as Zavala. Special mention too must go to Debra Wilson, whose performance as Savathûn is a clear highlight of the entire expansion.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £41.99
ETA Out now
PUB Bungie
DEV Bungie
PLAYERS 1-12
LENGTH 10+ hrs (full campaign)
ACCESSIBILITY Movement control/button layout options; invert Y and X axes and vibration on/off; wide range of graphical adjustments; crossplay, voice chat, and text chat on/off; much more

SOUND GUARDIAN

The campaign takes us straight into the heart of The Traveler. This is used as an opportunity to place you in a variety of new environments, including recreations of past areas, while facing off against a greatest hits compilation of foes. A few new ones are thrown in, in the form of the Dread, but the vibe is definitely one of celebrating the game's past while simultaneously drawing a line under several of its subplots.

On the surface (at least) it appears that the four-month delay was primarily for the benefit of the main campaign. In terms of narrative, it's sharper even than The Witch Queen, and the experience is more or less frictionless. It's also, thanks to the relatively recent (and horribly user-unfriendly, though functional) Fireteam Finder, the first campaign that can be played with strangers from day one. You're also given access to the Prismatic subclass, introduced here, pleasingly early.

Although you'll need to put in the hours to unlock the majority

The ability to mix and match aspects of different classes into one is very welcome.

1 It's difficult to fail the ultimate fight with so many players, but it's fun.
2 Once you've unlocked most Prismatic abilities, Aspects, and Fragments, it's the best subclass.
3 Ergo Sum with Sacred Flame can mark foes to explode on death.

of variables (this *is* still Destiny), the ability to mix and match aspects of different classes into one is very welcome. We'll take the new Super, a Stasis grenade, Solar melee, and Strand decoy ability. While playing Prismatic, you also get access to an ability charged by mixing Light and Dark damage, which temporarily supercharges you and gives you access to a devastating grenade.

CAYDE FIRE

Outside the campaign, things can slip back into unwelcome Destiny habits. Confusing environment design with poor waypoint implementation, missions that almost seem designed to punish solo players, poorly explained objectives – they're all here. It's a minority of the experience, though, and the Overthrow activity for the Traveler's open world is a simple but fun way to carve your path through legions of enemies.

An expansion means more Exotics. Red Death Reformed, a pulse rifle that partially heals with each kill, is already a favourite with Crucible players. Others are Ergo Sum, a sword with random perk rolls, and the sniper rifle Still Hunt. The latter can fire Golden Gun shots (using any class) once you've scored enough precision kills and/or collected enough Orbs Of Power.

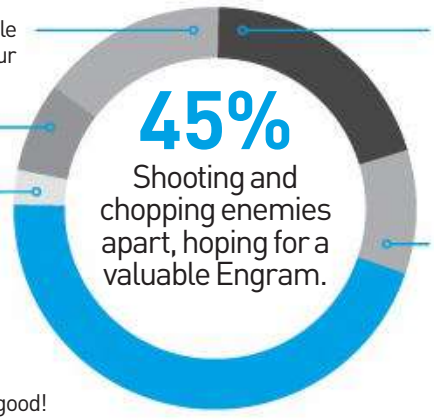
More activities and earnable goodies will be doled out via the Echoes chapter, and so far, it's good stuff. By listening to fans, streamlining progression, and adding a customisable subclass, Bungie has managed to square the circle for The Final Shape.

A campaign that celebrates Destiny and its history, plus tweaks that smooth many of the bumps in the overall experience, set everything back on track. Luke Kemp

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: DESTINY 2: TFS



15% Playing Crucible matches against your fellow Guardians.

7% Examining, testing, storing, and deconstructing those RNGtastic weapons and armour.

3% Appreciating Debra Wilson's performance as Savathûn. She's so good!

20% Chasing down all the side-missions to complete your collection of Exotics.

10% Playing the campaign to finally put an end to The Witness.

STATPACK

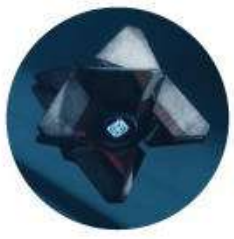
12
Players band together for the final battle against The Witness in Excision, a repeatable activity unlocked once the bulk of the campaign is done.

06
Subclasses are now available with the addition of Prismatic, which draws from the other five. You need to work to unlock its full potential.

06
New Dread enemies are introduced (a seventh is the existing Tormentor). Watch out for the flying Grim, which can suppress if you get too close.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

CAYDE-6
Guess who's back, back again? Cayde is back, your dead friend. Guess who's back...



GHOST
Your faithful Ghost plays a much bigger role in proceedings this time around.

HUSK
These things can release a homing explosive on death. Be prepared for it!

HOW TO... KILL PRISMATIC ENEMIES

You can only breach Prismatic shields by Transcending, becoming Prismatic yourself. If your ability isn't ready yet, there should be a well of Prismatic light nearby. Find one, stand in it to rapidly charge the relevant gauge, and hit L3 + R3. Now any damage you deal will be effective!

IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES
Strand was a great addition to Destiny 2, but overall the Lightfall expansion was a little weak.

NO
It's not a huge gap, but the more interesting Throne World area clinches it for The Witch Queen.

YES
Beyond Light was a shot in the arm, but doesn't benefit from the QOL improvements that were to come.

The ruined Beira D oil rig has plenty of hazards that'll kill you even between monster encounters.

Still Wakes The Deep

This gets a wave review. You love to sea it

Oil rigs aren't the safest or cheeriest of places, even *without* the drill unleashing some kind of unknowable supernatural horror from the depths of the chilly North Sea. Alas, that's exactly what happens aboard the Beira D, and you – playing as rig worker Caz McLeary – are hurled right into the middle of it. You don't even get overtime.

The most remarkable thing about Still Wakes The Deep is the way it acknowledges and normalises *un*remarkable and perfectly normal things that most media likes to pretend don't exist. The bulk of the cast, for example, have beautifully thick Scottish accents of the type you rarely hear on TV or in movies unless they're being played for laughs. The dialogue feels authentic. And on a related note, we guarantee you will *never* have played a game that uses The Biggest Swear as much as this one. You know which word we mean. The one that would cause the page to burst into flames if we tried printing it.

The Word is sprinkled across the script casually and, crucially, naturally – just as it's actually (gasp) used by real people across the world, primarily members of the working class. These are working-class characters in a working-class world, doing a demanding job with a boss they all hate, sold convincingly in equal parts by great writing and brilliant acting. And because they're normal people doing normal but tough jobs, they're all completely unsuited to dealing with the horrors that are about to crawl throughout what doubles as their workplace *and* their temporary home.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £29.99
ETA Out now
PUB Secret Mode
DEV The Chinese Room
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 5-6 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Standard or story mode; colourblind modes; Quality/Performance graphics setting; hints and customisable subtitles on/off; customisable HUD; adjustable field of view, head bob, and head roll; motion blur, film grain, and chromatic aberration on/off; adjustable volume elements; invert Y axis; and much more

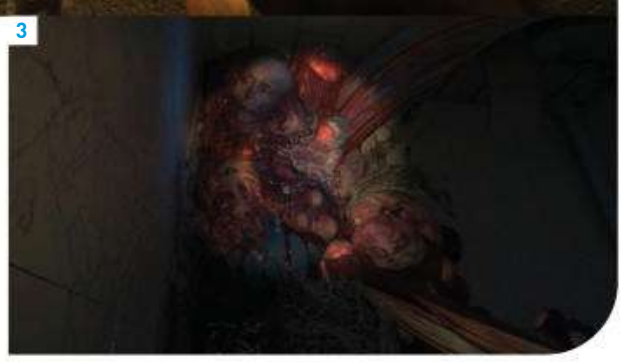
CUNNING STUNT

After some scene-setting to establish the atmosphere and characters, the inevitable Event takes place, and Caz needs to get the hell off that oil rig. There are monsters on board – possessed and warped members of the crew – but you don't get into combat with them. You aren't a superhero or a soldier, just an electrician running away from his problems on the mainland. There are relatively few encounters with these beasts, but each one requires you to sneak past unseen, or, on occasion, leg it.

You almost never get a good look at these things (not unless you're a second away from being killed by one, anyway), which demonstrates The Chinese Room's keen understanding of horror. We wouldn't describe this as a *scary* game, but it has some very effective moments of tension. Scripted chase sequences are short but adrenaline-pumping, while the sneaky-sneaky sections, complete with a 'throw stuff to distract the beasties' mechanic, never outstay their welcome and encourage you to embrace the slow pace.

Most of the game is about navigating the rig. Whatever the

> **They're normal people doing normal but tough jobs, unsuited to dealing with the horrors.**



1 Your boss. Sure hope nothing happens to him... 2 Handy coincidence you're an electrician, given the number of electrical mishaps you need to fix. 3 Some of your pals have been turned into squishy decoration. Tasteful.

invading horror is (something that's never explicitly explained), it's not only left fleshy growths about the place, plus mysterious tangles that mess with your head when you get too close to them, it's also literally ripped through the structure of the Beira D. There's lots of climbing and death-defying leaping, none of which Caz is suited to or particularly happy about. Finding your way is usually easy thanks to the environment-appropriate use of yellow (although if this bothers you, an option to minimise it is planned).

OIL RIGGED

If all else fails, you can hit ← on the D-pad twice for a waypoint marker. There are, unfortunately, two exceptions to this smooth pathfinding. The most egregious example is a room with a gas leak, where you're tasked with finding the correct valve (in a room full of the things) to shut it off before you pass out. The one you want is obvious when you finally find it, but it's accessed via a hard-to-see gap.

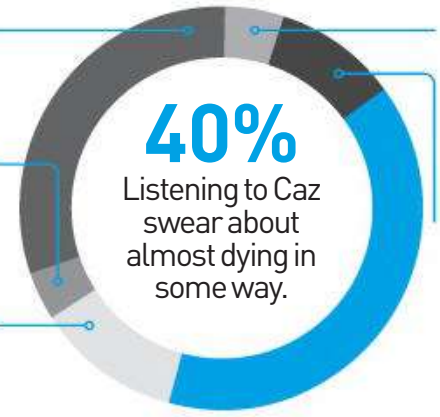
This bump in the road aside, The Chinese Room knows exactly what it wants Still Wakes The Deep to do, and it does it very well indeed. The relatively brief runtime suits the experience perfectly, and while there are very few sequences likely to result in failure, this is clearly by design. Think of it as a story you're enjoying and driving at the same time, rather than a horror game you're meant to survive.

Strong dialogue plus naturalistic acting makes the supernatural natural. Short but effective, with a final stretch that makes you reconsider all that's gone before. Luke Kemp

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: SWTD



31% Jumping and climbing like a very unhappy platform hero.

4% Being happy the National Front supporter didn't survive. Good riddance.

12% Being glad you're not able to look closely at that monster.

5% Trying to find the valve in that flippin' gas leak section.

10% Balancing the flashbacks with current events, trying to decipher the truth.

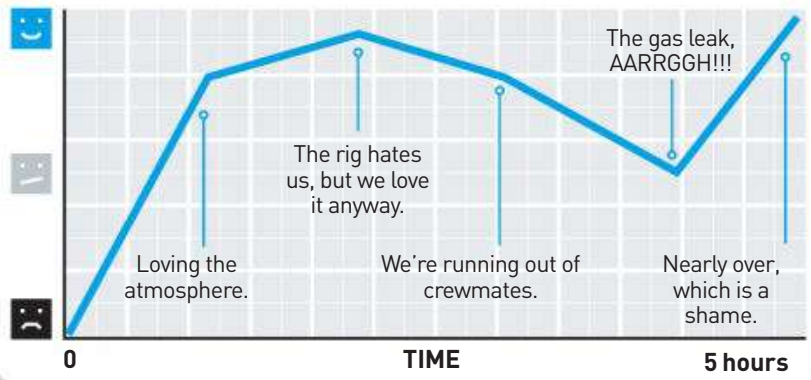
STATPACK

'75
The year this all takes place out in the chilly North Sea. The truly terrible state of the British economy at the time looms in the background.

01
Trophy on offer for completing the game using the Scottish Gaelic language option. Another excuse to play through again? Fine with us.

02
Prior projects gave The Chinese Room a taste for horror: Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs; and the studio's Half-Life 2 mod Korsakovia.

COMPEL-O-GRAPH



LOVING/HATING

RIG ROLLED
The Beira D is a wonderfully envisioned and executed setting for supernatural horror, right down to the last safety poster.

PATH TENSE
Working out where to go from this helicopter is tricky. Did we mention the gas leak? [*Just a few times...* – ed]

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Talk to everyone in the intro. You won't get a chance with most of them later...

SILVER
Listen to every phone call. As you go, look for the phones hanging on the walls.

GOLD
Finish the game without sprinting for more than ten minutes cumulatively.

Elden Ring: Shadow Of The Erdtree

A cosy game about trees and gardening? Er, not quite

Every other game released is a soulslike nowadays, it seems, but that's not FromSoftware's fault. Look, we love action RPGs, hardcore combat, exploring eye-bleedingly beautiful locales, and getting our faces socked in by cosmic horror nightmares as much as anyone. But with games 'inspired' by Dark Souls launching constantly, can an expansion to the real deal still impress players?

Actually, the real question is whether they can access it at all, as it's stuck behind *Mohg*. For the uninitiated, Mohg, Lord Of Blood is a once-optional boss fight who's an absolute [VARIOUS WORDS UNPRINTABLE IN A MAGAZINE] and you'll have to defeat him before you can access this DLC. He's all but impossible to beat, too, unless you have an item that you can only obtain through a load of obtuse, drawn-out nonsense/compelling peerless game design (delete depending on how FromSoftware-pilled you are). As statements of intent go, it's not the most promising start to a DLC.

And yet this has fixed what we saw as one of the main flaws in the game. Elden Ring is From's first open-world and offers a staggering amount of freedom. The problem is, that also makes it too easy to go wandering into an area that you are vastly underlevelled for. More annoyingly, you'll constantly chance upon areas you *should* have been through when you were weaker, and progressing through them later is a challenge-free bore. Shadow Of The Erdtree is certainly still DualSense-shatteringly difficult in places, with its giant flaming wicker men stomping about the map and some truly evil new bosses. But hiring Mohg as a bouncer turns out to be a stroke of genius, because if you can defeat *him*, you'll be at the right level for most of what Erdtree throws at you. An interesting new levelling system, wherein you find items that give a permanent boost to all your stats (while in the Land Of Shadow only) also helps you power up, even if it's not nearly as satisfying as successfully getting enough runes back to a levelling up point alive.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £34.99
ETA Out now
PUB Bandai Namco
DEV FromSoftware
PLAYERS 1-4
LENGTH 35 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable vibration; subtitles

SHADOW REALM

Here, the smaller open world – but honestly, not much smaller! – returns a welcome sense of focus. Oh, you'll still get lost, and get ready for a lot of trips to the (deliberately) unhelpful map screen as you pore over every inch of it looking for hidden routes. But it feels more logical than the main game, with a clearer trail of breadcrumbs to follow. It still requires paying attention to proceed, but is significantly less frustrating to those who haven't memorised the Elden Ring Wiki.

1 Don't be disappointed by the size of the map – it's bigger and deeper than it appears. 2 Bloodborne, who? This DLC gets just as cosmic at times. 3 This is a photo of us, reacting to beating a boss after 39428420931 tries.

Which means with enough perseverance you'll see most of it. And the good news is that most of it is basically *brilliant*. The boss fights stand tall with the series' best, there's a whole Hell's worth of new 'standard' (ha!) enemies to battle, and is anyone doing better location design than this studio right now? Venture into one forest and you'll find a horror game that's the best Silent Hill in years. Prefer body horror? 1) Ewww 2) Go underground and discover the horrifying secret of how those sentient pots are made.

But unlike too many of its imitators (Lies Of P, Lords Of The Fallen, and the like) it's not a relentlessly grimdark misery-fest. You'll visit beautiful lands that make this hostile world almost worth fighting for. Speaking of which, have you ever considered throwing your weapons away and trying to beat one of these games with your fists? Shockingly, the new martial arts fighting style not only makes that a feasible proposition, it makes it a brilliantly entertaining one. It's a great choice if you've long grown tired of swords and spells.

We still have some issues. Some of its 'tricks' are growing stale – another enemy hidden around a corner, is it? And there's a reason this year's Astro Bot platformer won't be starring the imprecise git that is this game's double-jumping horse. And yet everything Elden Ring set out to accomplish coalesces here, ascending From's open world to new heights.

FromSoftware continues to rule the genre it invented. If you didn't care for Elden Ring, run away screaming. Otherwise, come on in and scream with frustration. Abbie Stone

9 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: ELDEN RING: SOTE

14% Making a new martial arts build and remaking The Raid.

16% Peering through your fingers as you learn more about the sentient pots.

10% Ooohing and ahhhing at the beautiful locations. Phwoar!

22% Running past various abominations instead of fighting them (yes you will, admit it).

13% Staring at the You Died screen and briefly wishing you'd bought V Rising instead.

HOW TO... UNLOCK MARTIAL ARTS

You'll find new NPC Dryleaf Dane at the Moorth Ruins Site Of Grace, a few hours into the DLC. Being the strong, silent type, Dane won't speak to you, so it's time to start gesturing! One of the gestures will start a fight, with a fantastic reward when you win. Good luck!

LOVING/HATING

WICKER FAN
You'll meet a flaming wicker man within seconds of starting. What a glorious – and accurate – preview of the imaginative horrors to come.

YOU ARE GLUE
Yes. We want to resurrect our horse. Why would you ask us this? Why is the default option 'no'? Why do you hate us, FromSoftware?

MULTIPLAYER

Definitely get in the habit of leaving helpful messages for other players, highlighting hidden routes they might otherwise miss or warning them about surprise enemies. If someone rates your message 'good' you'll get a health boost – which could save you later.

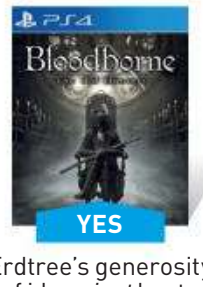
IS IT BETTER THAN?

YES

Significantly. Dark Souls III's DLC's were a bit too overfamiliar/masochistic for our tastes.

YES

Dark Souls II's excellent DLCs – including an invisible boss – still can't beat Erdtree.



YES

Erdtree's generosity of ideas *just* beats Bloodborne's terrific expansion The Old Hunters.

Artist David Hellman, known for his work on 2009's Braid, brings these gliding blocks to life with gorgeous painted panels.

Arranger

Cha cha real smooth

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE TBC
ETA 25 Jul
PUB Furniture & Mattress LLC
DEV Furniture & Mattress LLC
PLAYERS 1-2
LENGTH 9+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Screen shake on/off; adjustable text size (no voice acting); various assist features; most puzzles skippable; quest tracker option; Buddy mode (help via second controller)

Let's not get lost in the shuffle: developer Furniture & Mattress' debut sees you play as a foundling called Jemma, whose world is often turned upside down by her mere presence. Around her, environments become sliding block puzzles, objects moving when she does, her surroundings transforming into places not that far removed from something sliding out of Jamiroquai's Virtual Insanity music video.

Moving swiftly on from that dated reference, the Static is a complicating force of nature among all of this, creating obstacles unmoved by Jemma's power. As she leaves the only home she's ever known to see what missing pieces of her past she can slide into place, what follows is an adventure about the power of change. The resulting story proves a light touch, but it's supported by lively comedic writing and gorgeous art that'll absolutely charm your socks off.

SLIDING FLOORS

That's on top of puzzle design that tucks fresh flourishes into every corner, from goin' fishing to buddying up and playing in parallel. Just don't make my mistake and assume this is somehow secretly a metroidvania for an embarrassingly long time; nearly every challenge is self-contained and solvable as long as you can get within shuffling distance… well, for most players.

To say I'm 'spatially unaware' doesn't really cover it. School sports were always a trial: one of the rare few times I actually managed to get my bat to connect with the ball during a game of rounders, the ball then neatly connected with first base – I thereby removed *myself* from play. Noodling through this puzzler often feels like batting myself out. The edges of Arranger's environments loop, so sometimes the best route for shuffling a character or object into position follows a path offscreen. It's a novel way to think about virtual space, but I repeatedly find myself failing to account for this full range of motion – though I'm promptly reminded as soon as another member of Team PLAY picks up the controller and makes short work of whatever conundrum I'm stuck on.

Fortunately thoughtful assist options mean you won't throw yourself at any one immovable object for too long; you can skip almost every puzzle individually, leaving it unsolved in case you later fancy going back and giving it another crack.

Around Jemma, environments become sliding block puzzles, objects moving when she does.

Though Arranger targets my *very* specific weaknesses, each brain-prodding puzzle is worth noodling over. Yes, you could merrily skip on by most of it, but each challenge so elegantly iterates upon what came before that you'll be lost if you don't bash your head at least a little bit against every go-around.

Don't let this puzzler slide by. With strong comedic writing, glowing art direction, and lots of fiendish brain ticklers, it's well worth wrapping your head around. **Jess Kinghorn**

8 PLAY

All three episodes are worthwhile 'What if's, though the rose-tinted vision of 'Number One Fan' is the clear standout.

Alan Wake 2: Night Springs

Keepin' it weird

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £15 (as part of deluxe upgrade add-on)
ETA Out now
PUB Epic Games
DEV Remedy Entertainment
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 3+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable horror flash visual/audio intensity; customisable subtitle options; controller vibration slider; adjustable camera/turning sensitivities and hyperacusis filter strength; motion blur, film grain, and lens distortion toggles; aim assist; remappable controls; quick turn on/off; button tapping/single button press; sprint toggle/hold; story mode difficulty settings

Rejoice, fellow Remedy sicko! Tiding us over until the Lake House DLC makes waves, Night Springs leaps off the page in three 'what if?' scenarios centring on some Connected Universe favourites. Each episode emulates the usual speculative anthology series suspects, down to being bookended by a word from the always-magnetic David Harewood as channel-hopping TV host Warlin Door.

First up in this DLC miniseries is everyone's favourite waitress and fan fic writer Rose Marigold. This pitches up as a charming daydream where our heroine is not only valued at her hospitality job, but also the only one who can save her beloved author from a fate worse than writer's block.

This hour-long, rose-tinted vision is a blast – literally. Immediately kitting Rose out with some high-powered 'accessories,' plus all the ammo you could ever want, this vignette allows Remedy's shooting to shine… while also exposing its shortcomings in microcosm. Memorable Big Bad encounters are unfortunately hampered by tight spaces that place Rose on the back foot and us in a tension-sapping spiral of retries. Still, this episode is the strongest of the bunch. What can we say? That pink colour grading punctuated by blood spatter had us from the first frame, and we can't wait to revisit it in the new photo mode.

SCREAMING ORIGINAL

Next up sees the return of Jesse Faden, protagonist of 2019's new weird shooter Control. Reminiscent of that game's AWE DLC, Faden fights Fade Outs while in pursuit of her missing sibling. Despite a distinctive retooling of the base game's caffeinated theme park Coffee World, this day out for the FBC director doesn't quite reach the same high as the preceding episode, though it does leave us with an intriguing final image.

Three 'What if?' scenarios centring on some Remedy Connected Universe favourites.

That said, it's a joy to hear actress Courtney Hope back in action – which neatly brings us to the final episode. Following a fictionalised façade of actor Shawn Ashmore, it's more than a mere Quantum Break reunion; this episode is by far the most ambitious of the bunch, mixing and matching gameplay modes as its leading man crosses the boards of parallel dimensions. Besides straight shooting, there's a side-step into side-scrolling action (complete with a well-observed, crispy, compressed visual style), and even a trip down a text-based rabbit hole that's sure to set the ol' fan theory mill in motion.

Even though the compact runtime of each episode throws the base game's rougher edges into stark relief, this miniseries is a fun intermission accompanying what remains a real page turner. Each episode we play, though brief, leaves us wanting to go further down this fascinating spiral.

Short, sharp episodes highlight the base game's shortcomings, but otherwise this miniseries is a merry turn down the spiral that leaves us wanting more. **Jess Kinghorn**

8 PLAY

We've all encountered unsavoury youths at least once or twice.

The Legend Of Heroes: Trails Through Daybreak

Spriggan in your step

As it's the 11th main entry in Nihon Falcom's RPG juggernaut, it's baffling to think that Trails Through Daybreak is only just kicking off the series' second half. Daybreak is the fresh start Trails needs, though we're not saying past entries were bad. Building upon one of the best long-running narratives in gaming while being newcomer-friendly isn't easy, yet Daybreak succeeds.

Though it's set one year after Trails Into Reverie's conclusion, you don't need prior knowledge to jump into Daybreak. Numerous references to past events are present, yet it never feels too much. Our latest destination, Calvard, is influenced by post-revolutionary France, and the nation has considerable charms. Between Edith's sprawling metropolis and the rural Creil Village, there's great character to this exciting location.

You play as Van Arkride, a Spriggan who handles odd jobs with his part-time employees. Between hunting bounties, exterminating monsters, and private detective work, Daybreak doesn't lack activities. A few side-quests get tedious, though the worst offenders are optional. Still, each contributes to Trails' fantastic worldbuilding. With anti-immigration sentiment stirring as Calvard faces an uncertain future, Daybreak challenges these outdated views while paralleling real-life concerns.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £54.99
ETA Out now
PUB NIS America
DEV Nihon Falcom
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 60-65 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Auto-advance messages; auto-battle settings; minimap with key objectives; difficulty settings; adjustable font sizes, camera sensitivities, and brightness; audio slider; controls partly remappable

VAN WITH A PLAN

What's particularly interesting is how Van contrasts with previous protagonists. After playing as police officers, military academy students, and even a priest, playing as Van enables us to look beyond black-and-white situations to find the grey. He'll work with honest civilians, shady underground organisations, and everyone in between, providing it's not unethical. A new alignment system reflects that middle ground – it doesn't change the main story but opens up minor avenues depending on how you resolve quests.

Daybreak feels similar to previous entries, both in action and thematically, and that's no bad thing. Some dungeons can feel drawn out, though the high-speed mode and sprint functions mitigate this. Monsters continue roaming the underground and highways; you won't find any random encounters; and the use of turn-based combat, now called 'Command Battles', continues.

Each party member can use a standard attack alongside more specialised abilities such as magical Art attacks. Crafts also offer unique alternatives, including a powerful S-Craft that uses CP that's basically an ultimate attack. It's pretty straightforward, although the lack of Brave Orders to provide

1 Is it so much to ask for a normal protagonist? 2 Say what you want about Ouroboros, they've got style. 3 Not every tea party Renne's hosted has been this peaceful.

temporary stat boosts feels like a step back. That's a minor issue, though.

That's complemented by some subtle changes. Daybreak offers a more fluid revision of Cold Steel's combat links, so instead of directly linking two allies for combat bonuses like a followup attack, all you need to do is stand next to someone while attacking. And like Rean using Spirit Unification, Van can transform into a powerful being known as the Grendal, a nice option against tougher foes.

TIMES ARE CHANGING

Daybreak introduces a hybrid combat system reminiscent of Ys that lets you play certain sections like an action RPG. Major fights are turn-based only, though 'Field Battles' speed up fights by attacking enemies in real-time with basic abilities, creating an effective compromise for those after quicker-paced fights.

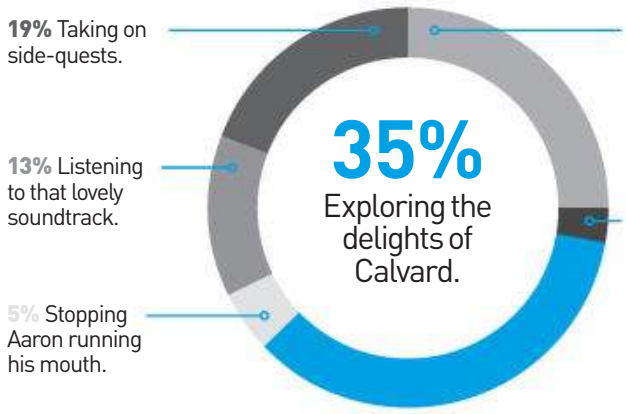
It's one of several signs that Trails is evolving, though the series' spirit remains intact. Trails has previously been guilty of some questionable moments, but Daybreak feels noticeably more mature. Action scenes are still over-the-top, yet it's more socially aware, with sharp humour and improved character writing. Crucially, Daybreak presents a (mostly) clean break from Cold Steel. That's helped by an improved presentation. The improved visuals look sharp while remaining familiar and the soundtrack packs numerous hits that you'll find yourself listening to on repeat.

An exciting fresh start for the RPG series. With strong character writing and excellent worldbuilding, it's newcomer-friendly while appealing to fans. **Henry Stockdale**

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: TLOH: TTD


19% Taking on side-quests.
13% Listening to that lovely soundtrack.
5% Stopping Aaron running his mouth.
35%
Exploring the delights of Calvard.
25% Bringing down disgusting monsters and shady individuals in combat.
3% Listening to Van talk about sweet treats or his car.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

ELAINE AUCLAIR
Van's childhood friend and an A-rank Bracer, Elaine always keeps him in check.

AGNÈS CLAUDEL
Agnès is a part-timer at Arkride Solutions uncovering the secrets of the Genesis devices.

GERARD DANTÈS
An ambitious gang leader, Gerard will do anything to reach his goals.

HOW TO... EXPLORE FASTER

There's a lot of ground to cover in Calvard – the republic is one of Zemuria's two superpowers and is a massive place – but if you're after a quicker approach to getting around beyond fast travel, hit L1 to sprint or the left touchpad to use high-speed mode.

LOVING/HATING

TRAILSER SWIFT
Nihon Falcom always delivers strong soundtracks. With songs like 'In The Dawn' and 'Tilt The Cocktail,' Daybreak is no exception.

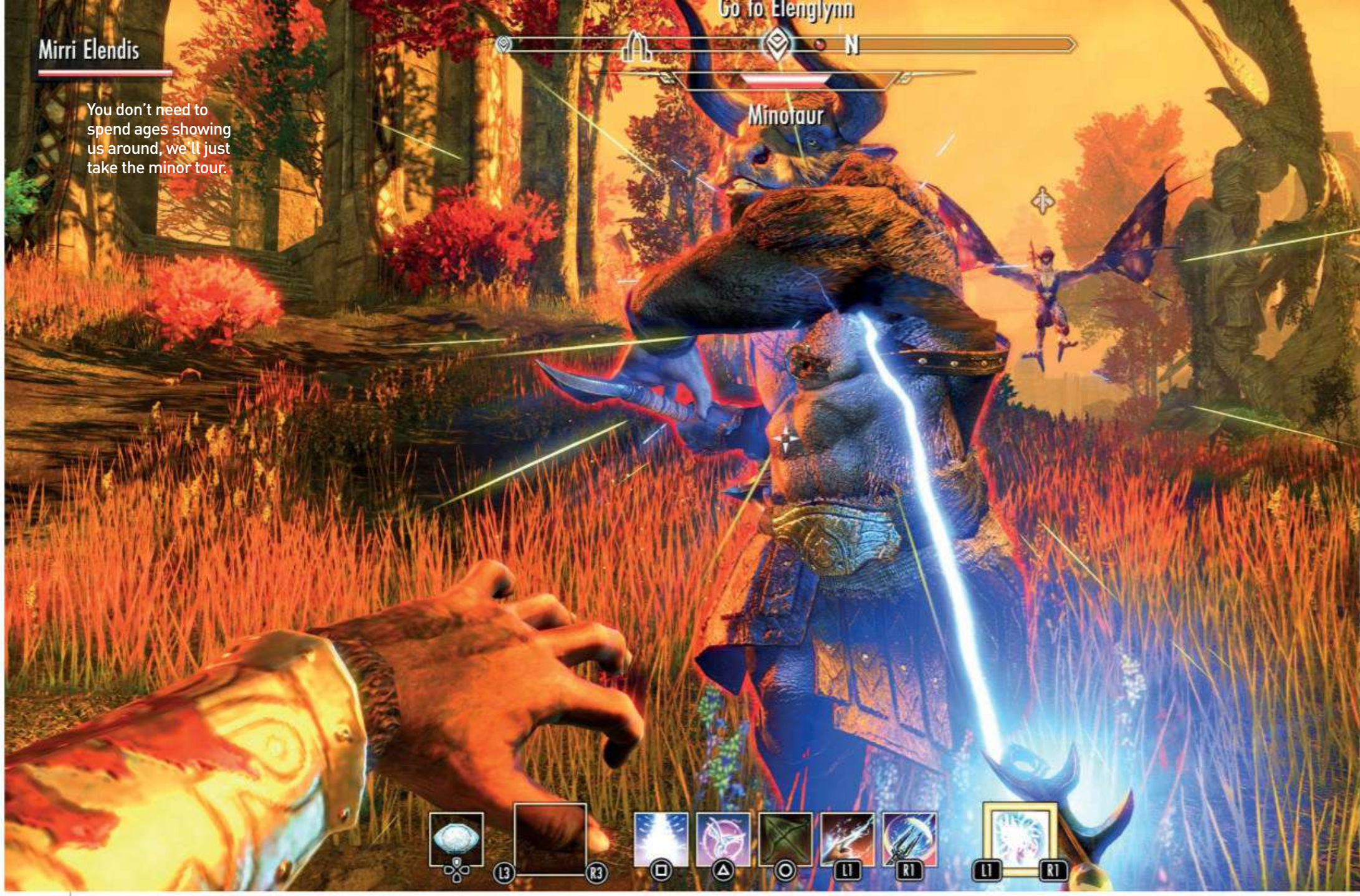
TRAILS ARE SLOW
Augh, those overly long maps. A desert should not feel like a slog to explore, even with high-speed mode and sprint on.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
You must eat pretty much every dish in Calvard to raise your Gourmet Rank.

BRONZE
Opening 150 treasure chests across Daybreak will reward you with this.

SILVER
Become Calvard's most cultured Spriggan by watching every film.



The Elder Scrolls Online:

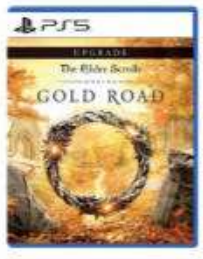
Gold Road

Keeping us engaged with the carat-and-stick approach

Unusually for TESO, the latest expansion picks up directly after – and links straight into – the events of the last one. Necrom's story revealed that a forgotten Daedric Prince had been wiped from the memory of all existence, but was on the way back. It's disappointing, then, that narratively speaking, the followup is less 'diamond in the rough', and more 'fool's gold'.

So closely are the stories intertwined that if you decided to skip Necrom, Gold Road's main questline will feature characters, references, places, and events that will mean little to nothing to you. However, if you *did* join the wiggliest Prince and his assistant on their quest to preserve the fabric of reality, get ready for what might well be the series' most anticlimactic end to a questline yet. And certainly don't hold your breath for a clear explanation of exactly *why* this forgotten Prince is so dangerous.

That's not to say that the new story is a complete write off. You come face to face with the new/old Prince, Ithelia, quite early in the questline. Initially she appears to be suffering from amnesia, and you then learn that her mind is in fact caught between realities. This then leads into what is, in fact, one of the most interesting ideas that TESO has yet played with.



INFO

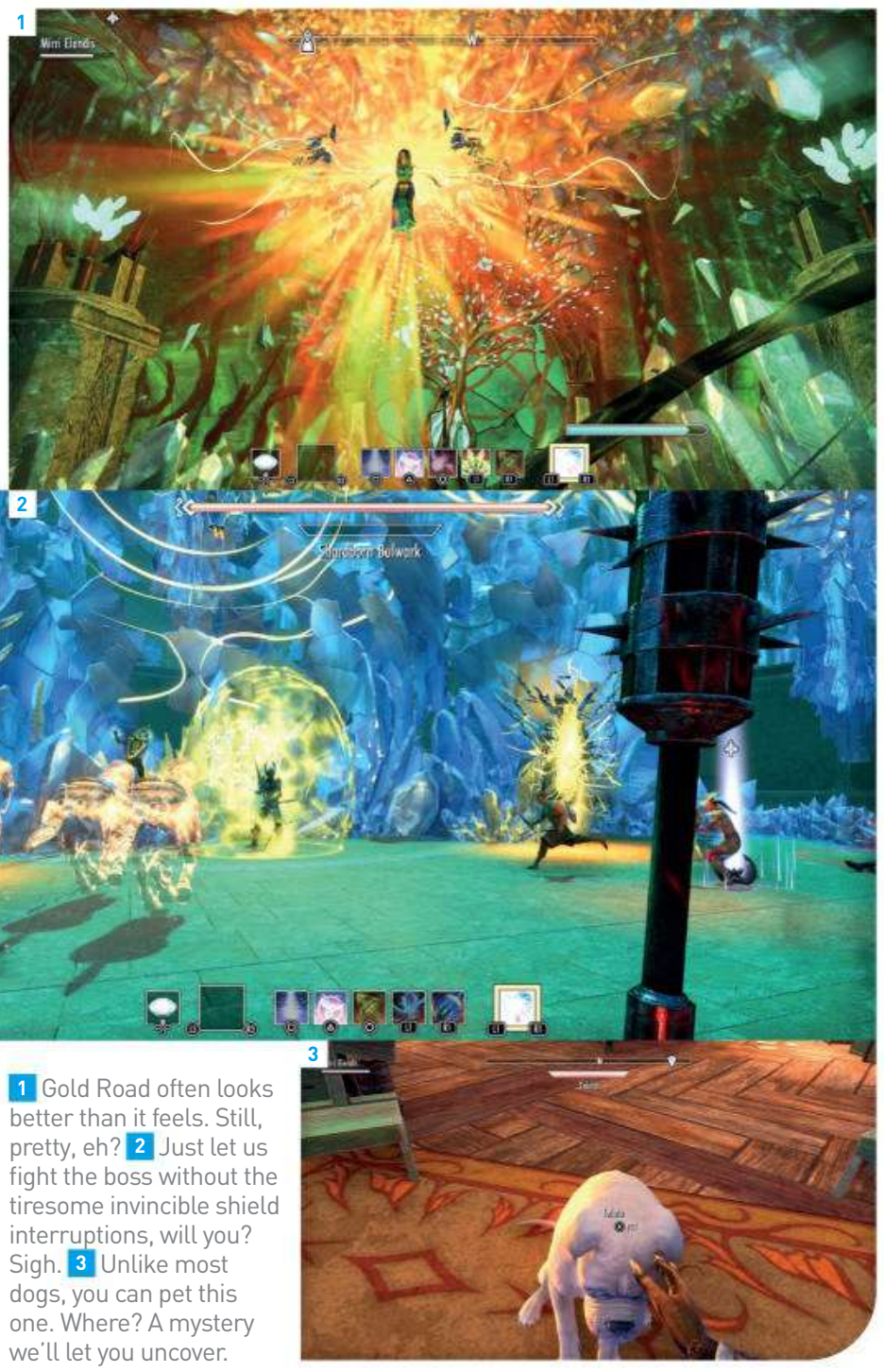
FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £32.99
ETA Out now
PUB Bethesda Softworks
DEV ZeniMax Online Studios
PLAYERS 1-12
LENGTH 10 hrs approx (main questlines)
ACCESSIBILITY Extensive, inc many visual and audio adjustments; choice of control schemes; vibration on/off and adjustable screen shake intensity

GOLD OPEN

Ithelia is fated to be thwarted by Hermaeus Mora, no matter what she does. At one point you jump between realities to briefly meet three different versions of Ithelia, who all react to this inevitable defeat in different ways. *This* should have been what the questline was all about. Instead, it's an all-too-brief distraction from far less interesting, more formulaic activities. It doesn't help that this questline is more technically unstable than usual. TESO has always been a little buggy – the hilarious sight of demonic beings running away to their spawn points in the middle of a fight is not entirely uncommon – but the bugs and glitches sometimes rise to immersion-breaking levels here.

For whatever reason, this problem at least seems limited to the main quest. While there's no new class, Scribing – essentially Build A Bear for magic spells instead of teddies – is introduced with a surprisingly chonky questline of its own. This allows you to combine three different (and very grindable) aspects of your choosing to create a unique spell; but to unlock this ability, and all possible sources of 'ingredients' as rewards, you'll need to play through a story that teaches you the lore of this new technique.

This is much more enjoyable than the main story, and at



1 Gold Road often looks better than it feels. Still, pretty, eh? **2** Just let us fight the boss without the tiresome invincible shield interruptions, will you? Sigh. **3** Unlike most dogs, you can pet this one. Where? A mystery we'll let you uncover.

times will surprise you in all the right ways. First you have to find mythical creatures known as the Luminaries, each with their own fable. You then need to complete tasks for them, until eventually each agrees to lend their power to the Scholarium hub where you'll be Scribing. It's an interesting idea, and sometimes well executed. With significant trimming, it could have been excellent. As it is, it's a bloated questline with charming moments of fantasy interrupted by unappealingly formulaic tasks and a little too much travelling.

QUEST ON TIME

The leafy new area of West Weald, last seen in Oblivion, is… *fine*. It fails to carve out an identity of its own, but does at least seem to feature more passive creatures than usual, adding to the atmosphere (we particularly enjoy finding the occasional prairie dog just chilling out on a rock).

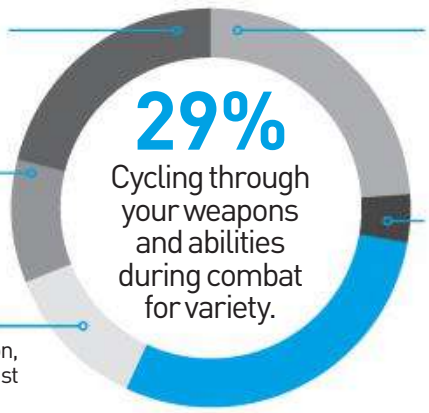
Wandering around the new area, though, the wonderful little flourishes that TESO scatters around outside quests are still present and correct. Our favourite extremely brief but equally memorable encounters include an amateur necromancer, a drunken orc, and a lone Khajiit being robbed by bandits. When we rescue her, she rewards us with the contents of the bag they were trying to steal, which is – spoiler alert! – an award-winning radish. Moments like these are where the real treasure of this latest expansion is.

The writing and the design butt heads a little too often, resulting in an expansion that keeps getting in its own way. There *is* gold; just not enough. Luke Kemp

6 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: TESO: GOLD ROAD



21% Grabbing loot, equipping loot, swapping loot, selling loot, destroying loot…

10% Finding something cool, and wishing more of Gold Road was like this.

12% Playing with others in an Incursion, Dungeon, Duel, or just a random fight.

24% Running or riding across the land. Why are so few tasks close together?

4% Wishing there were some munchkins, or a wicked witch to throw water on.

HOW TO… DISPEL LUMINARY WARDS

After using the Lens in one of the clouds of purple smoke, a nearby Ward will be visible for a limited time. They're usually placed above or below your line of sight, and you might have to move around very slightly to find it. Hit ⊗, and you're done! Now onto the next one.

STATPACK

05
Luminaries to get on side in order to add Scribing bits and bobs to all reward pools. Disappointingly, their trials mostly follow the same formula.

01
Side-quest brings back everybody's favourite Khajiit investigator, Mizzik Thunderboots. This one is glad to see him return to right wrongs!

12
People can play the latest trial, Lucent Citadel. But there's still no matchmaking! Come on ZeniMax, we don't all have Guilds (or friends; sniff).

LOVING/HATING

TOTALLY RADISHAL
Small moments of humour and charm are numerous, and encourage you to explore West Weald thoroughly.

WARD A WASTE
Using the Lens and dispelling Wards to progress the Scribing quest is a dull, time-consuming, and unwelcome process.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Complete the Scribing questline – which will take you a good few hours – and it's yours.

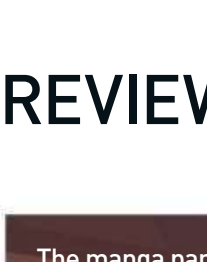
SILVER
Essentially, clear out Lucent Citadel. You'll have earned this, and certainly not alone.

GOLD
This is one for the completionists: you need to run down *all* quests and dungeons.

The manga panels work so well that we'd love to see more games (VR or not) doing this.

Sushi Ben

This town's a bit fishy



INFO

FORMAT PSVR2
PRICE £19.99
ETA Out now
PUB Big Brane Studios
DEV Big Brane Studios
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 4 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Story mode; teleport-only option; snap-turning; height of dialogue boxes adjustable by hand

Something's not quite right about this romanticised Japanese backwater town. There's a big hint at the problem in the multitude of inescapable signs sporting the obnoxious face of Minami, an estate agent land shark who's buying up everything, aided by her 'chief intimidation officer' Mashiro. Their next target is to shut down sushi bar Daruma-Zushi. But not if we can help it.

It's your job to help timid sushi chef Ben, first by restocking the retaurant with a number of ingredients, including fresh fish, rice, and vinegar, and then getting the place back in business by inviting the locals to become customers once again. To do this, you have to complete various minigames, such as fishing, bug-catching, and purging ghosts with a jar that functions like a vacuum cleaner. Most of these are fairly simple with VR motion controls, apart from the occasional requests, which require you to catch something in a net and then drop it on the ground so you can pick up, which can be finicky.

ROD AND ROLL

Fishing is your most frequent task, if only because after inviting someone to the sushi bar you usually have to catch the fish they've requested. Not that you'll have to grind this out since you'll always catch the type they ask for, and the whole process is nicely implemented: in between reeling, you also have to position the end of the rod in circles that pop up to prevent your catch from getting away. Ultimately, the real reward comes from actually sitting down with each of the townspeople at the end of the day for sushi, while using the Sense controller as chopsticks to pick up and gulp down virtual raw fish is pretty satisfying.

Characters may be cut from familiar anime tropes – the tough farmer with a weakness for cute things, the camp bar owner, the mild-mannered landlady with a taste for the occult and death metal – but they're all brought to life not just through the Japanese voiceover but via manga panels that do an excellent job of expressing emotions that are often missing in rudimentary animations. And if you didn't realise it's written by the creator of Hatoful Boyfriend, then a side-quest involving a carrier pigeon and gangster seagulls would surely give it away.

In its digestible requests that are mostly resolved before you retire to your futon and sleep ahead of starting another day, Sushi Ben doesn't outstay its welcome. If anything it's more surprising that it seems to leave a few mysteries unresolved as it teases a future episode. We certainly wouldn't mind visiting Kotobuki again, although more fleshed-out mechanics next time would be great.

> **Using the Sense controller as chopsticks to pick up virtual raw fish is pretty satisfying.**

The activities are pretty simple, but charming characters accentuated with manga techniques makes your brief time in this Japanese seaside town a memorable one. **Alan Wen**

7 PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 **PRICE** £32.99 **ETA** Out now **PUB** Stunlock Studios **DEV** Stunlock Studios **LENGTH** 70 hrs **PLAYERS** 1-4

V Rising

Hurray, it doesn't suck!

Verizon is an American internet provider, so we're a little confused about why we're covering it in PLAY magazi… oh, *V Rising*! Um, maybe rethink the name? This is a vampire survival game that doesn't even tell you it's got vampires! Why didn't they call it Vampire Survivo… oh, right.

If you're excited by the battle-ready vampire wielding a gun on the loading screen, you're in for a rude awakening: you spend the opening hours mining rocks and picking out floor tiles. We suppose even Count Dracula had to start somewhere, and there's definitely something charming about a game in which your end goal is to be a prince of darkness with a massive castle, but you start out having to chomp on rats and chop down trees. That said, some of these survival game tropes are almost as old as chopping down *actual* trees, and waiting around is also frustrating. *Forty entire minutes* just to upgrade our mind-controlled human slave? We'd almost prefer they unionise…

Combat is more interesting. It's an isometric affair, but trying to play this like Diablo would be about as wise as taking a garlic shower. You start with two spells and a dash/dodge, all on strict cooldowns, making it easy to screw yourself over. Strategic play is a must and well rewarded. At night you can explore freely, but during the day more than a few seconds exposed to sunlight sees your health bar go up in flames, forcing you to sprint between spots of shade. We love these desperate dashes back to our base, laden with precious resources, all too aware that we are just a few fights or an ill-advised spot of sunbathing away from losing everything.

Your end goal is to be a prince of darkness but you start out having to chomp on rats.

Best of all are the bosses. Fun to fight, and dishing out entertaining smack talk, each felled foe rewards you with points that you can spend on spells or unlocking new abilities such as being able to turn into a wolf. You'll endure those tedious hours gathering resources and crafting just to see what fun power you can unlock next. It's a mixed bag, then, but still pretty bloody good.

V Rising is flawed, and bits can drag, but in a world where great vampire games are more elusive than *actual* vampires, there's a lot to like here. Abbie Stone

7 PLAY

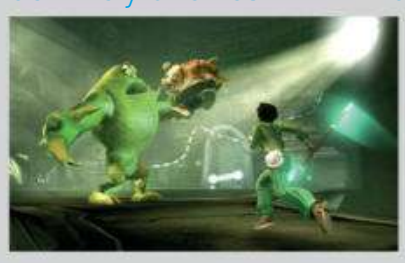
THREE TO PLAY

PSN games you might have missed

Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard pressed to play them all, so here we're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut. This month we're snapping up classics, taking them out for a spin, and tearing up the front page.

First up, we're getting behind the wheel of **F1 24**. Take to the track for a simulated race weekend, beginning with free practice and ending with the Grand Prix. Races feature the usual suspects of pit stops, engineer-issued mid-race objectives and even on-track incidents that can see you running out of road if you're not careful. This year's entry boasts a revamped career mode, while Braking Point, the story mode that featured in F1 2021 and F1 23, disappears in the rearview mirror. Farewell, Aidan and Devon, it was nice to know you. The game's very much what fans expect, though the retooled handling's understeering threatened the photo finish at launch. This has since been adjusted through a patch, but as I'm far from a motorhead, it's time to turn off at the next exit…

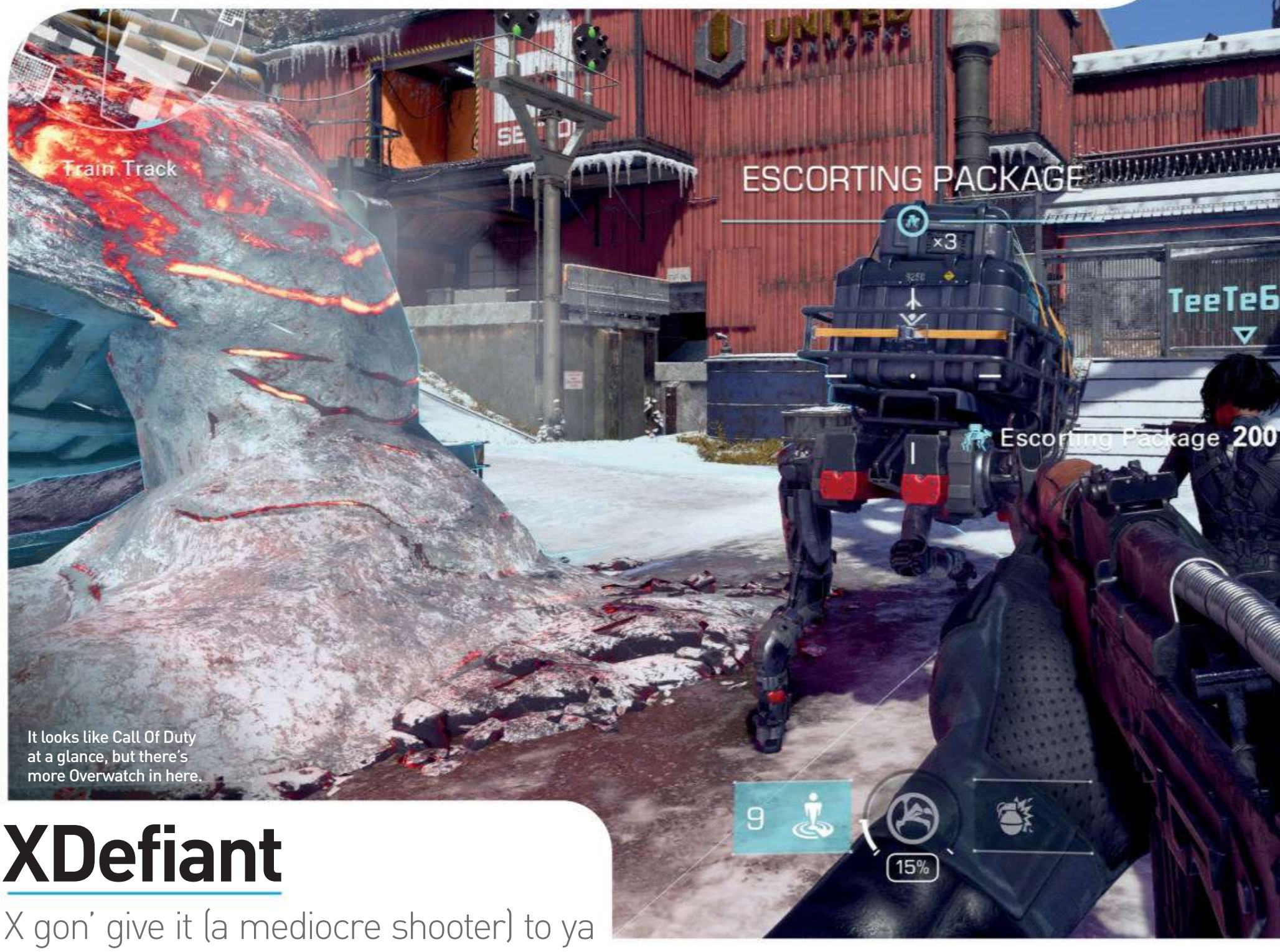
Next up, something definitely more my speed – **Times & Galaxy**. As the first robo-reporter for the titular holopaper of interplanetary renown, you've got 17 cycles to prove you belong in the newsroom alongside the organic reporters… and that maybe you should even be paid for your work! [*Don't get any ideas* – ed] After chasing up story leads, gathering clues, and gaining the confidence of chatty sources, it's up to you how you sell the news. The Build-A-Story tool sees you select everything from which colourful details to focus on to bring the story to life for your readers to just how buried your lede is. Though an unusual mechanical focus, it's definitely one Team PLAY can get behind.



Now, follow us not-quite-overleaf for our final game: **Beyond Good & Evil – 20th Anniversary Edition**. Playing as photojournalist Jade, your camera is as much a weapon as your dai-jo staff in the face of an alien invasion the powers-that-be would rather not draw attention to. This rerelease has been missing in action since the game's actual anniversary late last year, but comes in swinging with a solid remaster effort plus all-new flourishes that seed in nudges towards the eventual sequel. Trust us, our lenses are trained and ready for whenever *that* materialises. For now, it's good to return to the original.

ExtendedPLAY

From updates to favourites – the games we just can't quit



It looks like Call Of Duty at a glance, but there's more Overwatch in here.

XDefiant

X gon' give it (a mediocre shooter) to ya

What a silly name for a game (or for anything else, for that matter). Still, it's fitting that the name almost certainly results from a poor decision when the game itself is full of them. It's absolutely worth a try, if only because it's free; but before we elaborate on that, we need to address the elephant in the room, and the T-shirt it's wearing with the No Skill-Based Matchmaking logo.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PUB Ubisoft
DEV Ubisoft
YEAR 2024

The much-publicised lack of SBMM has attracted a higher than normal proportion of a certain type of player to the game. You know the one. Constantly slides and jumps around the map like a hyperactive dog on an ice rink? That one. This fact alone may be enough to convince you that you want to avoid – or possibly jump straight into – XDefiant.

Amusingly, there *is* actually SBMM. Specifically, for an introductory casual playlist up to level 25, and for ranked play. Using a truly epic amount of willpower, we're going to resist commenting on that further and instead point out that winning a non-SBMM match is often more down to luck than to, well… skill. You need to remember that not only does the opposing team have a random mix of skillsets, *your* team does too. No matter how good you are, if most of your team are inexperienced or simply not very good, you're destined to lose.

> **Winning a non-SBMM match is often more down to sheer luck than to, well… skill.**

SKILL ISSUE

Nonetheless, the rapid player movement and Overwatch-flavoured abilities dispel any fears of a Call Of Duty clone,

and ensure the experience is accessible and – yes, initially at least – fun. It's fast-paced, the gadgets offer a neat tactical twist, and it doesn't suffer from the painfully restricted range of weapons that Warface imposes without microtransactions. It's undeniably generous with what it gives out for free.

After a while, though, more than the lack of SBMM starts to grate. Aim assist is much weaker than in comparable games – which we're happy about – but the controls aren't *quite* tight enough to compensate for this. There's some major balancing work to be done with the guns, too, and none of them have the satisfying heft of COD. They feel how the experience as a whole feels: lightweight. More frustrating is that the developer, like a tiresomely high percentage of the playerbase, seems to value kills over playing the objective. That's perfect for Team Deathmatch, but this attitude drags down the objective-based modes that make up the bulk of the game. Ultimately, Call Of Duty X-Definitely doesn't have anything to fear from this. **Luke Kemp**

SIRN Akuma isn't just tough, his super meter also regenerates quickly.

Street Fighter 6 – Akuma

Demon rush

INFO **FORMAT** PS5, PS4 **PUB** Capcom **DEV** Capcom **YEAR** 2023

After a solid first season, Street Fighter 6 ends on a high with the return of Akuma, who may even unseat Luke and Ken in the game's current meta. As fighting games' ultimate glass cannon, he packs more varieties of powerful moves beyond the usual shoto (fireball-shoryuken-tatsu) playbook, whether that's pesky air fireballs that come at opponents diagonally or unpredictable demon raids.

> Akuma has a 30-second taunt animation that is the ultimate show of disrespect.

He can even now warp in for a throw. Heck, the return of his Raging Demon move means he's also the only character to have two CAs.

Suffice to say, longtime fans are having a ball figuring this fighting demon out, with one discovery being that he has a 30-second taunt animation that is the ultimate show of disrespect, in which he sits down with his back to his opponent and wolfs down a snack (we'd love to see someone pull this off in an actual tournament).

Those who just want to best Akuma also got the ultimate challenge as he launched alongside a time-limited battle hub event in which players are tasked with defeating a giant Akuma in the centre. First you have to fight him in specially designated cabinet matches, then the energy accumulated from that can be released as a fireball on the big guy. Whether you're good enough to take on a CPU opponent at the highest difficulty is another matter – we've been on the receiving end of his merciless juggle followed by a super finisher a few times.

As for what to expect for season two, surely 3rd Strike characters beckon? At least you can listen to that game's music during matches now, though curiously Elena's stage theme is absent. What could it mean?... **Alan Wen**

Sure, it does skew young but those monsters can still occasionally get ferocious.

Monster Hunter Stories

Baby steps for the RPG spinoff

With Capcom releasing both Monster Hunter Stories games at the same time, it's tempting to get the full collection (incidentally the only physical option), but is the first entry in this RPG spinoff series worth your time? It's certainly the one that gave the long-running main series a twist, putting you in the situation where you're no longer hunting monsters but peacefully co-existing with them as their rider.

INFO

FORMAT PS4
PUB Capcom
DEV Capcom, Marvelous
YEAR 2024

Despite the HD treatment, Stories' portable origins are still identifiable, be it in the constrictive map layouts and bland textures or the minimal animation of characters' mouths (as this is a story-focused game, at least it has a proper voiceover rather than the original's gibberish Monster Hunter language). A weirder quirk, very much of its the time, is the way its CG cinematics (which are nicely produced) feel at odds with the rather childish-looking anime aesthetic that even carries over to some of the monsters. For the sequel the devs at least opted for a more elegant cel-shaded look, which is also used consistently in-engine for cutscenes.

MONSTIE FORMULA

Stories contains many familiar staples from the mainline series (from the pre-World games, at any rate) to make fans feel at home, from item-combining recipes to the quest and forging loops. However, it's got something all of its own: this is the game where player-monstie interactions were first formulated. These include the need to pinch an egg from a monster den so that you can form a bond with the hatchling, and the way you use their useful traversal abilities, such as jumping, swimming, or breaking route-blocking rocks, when you're exploring.

> Despite the HD treatment, Monster Hunter Stories' portable origins are still identifiable.

The most important interactions are, of course, the turn-based battles using an attack triangle, where advantageous attacks build your kinship gauge – mechanics that essentially all reused in the sequel, where they're refined further. This first game lacks the way particular weapons are more or less effective against particular monsters, meaning it can feel a little like your rider is effectively taking the role of a palico compared to the damage your monsties can dish out.

We shouldn't make light of the endgame content, which can be just as challenging as in any game in the Monster Hunter canon, though here it's more dependent on grinding stats than skill compared to the action-oriented mainline titles. But unless you really yearn to know about the adventures of big-headed, bushy-tailed felyne Navirou (the only character from this game to return in the sequel), you can safely skip straight to the superior Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings Of Ruin, which we reviewed last issue. **Alan Wen**

Killer Klowns From Outer Space

Alien circus stars make for a tents experience

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 **PUB** Illfonic
DEV Illfonic, Teravision Games **YEAR** 2024

Being chased by murderous clowns is a literal nightmare for some people. Nonetheless, it turns out that this 3v7 Dead By Daylight in oversized sparkly trousers is a darn good time. Taking a surprising amount of direct inspiration from the cult B-movie of the same name, the atmosphere leans more towards silliness than horror.

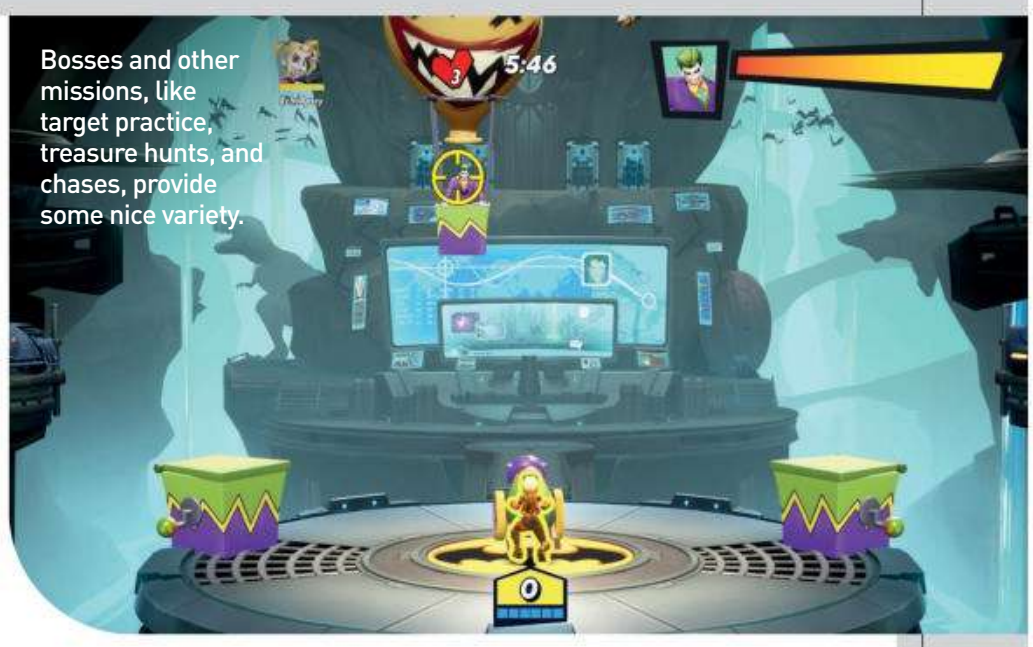
Playing as a klown is undeniably the most fun, as you have a range of useful and fun weapons and abilities to unlock. Two of the best are a balloon dog that can sniff out any humans within range, and an invisible car that increases movement speed and can be used to hit humans and stun them. Once you've found a victim, your job is to wrap them up in a candy-floss cocoon, or wear their health down so you can perform a 'klownality'.

While the three klowns have infinite-ammo weapons, and can respawn (albeit on a fairly lengthy timer), humans are not only more numerous, they're far from helpless – they're able to scavenge weapons, healing items, and gear to unlock the exits from the map. The main twist is that the klowns, and minions that they spawn from cocoon-powered generators, have heightened senses that mean they're able to pick up loud noises from a distance. Things like running, diving through a window, or failing a QTE while activating an exit can all draw red-nosed villains to your location.

The speed, agility, and sneakiness of the human characters balances well with the klowns' more bombastic abilities. Each side has strong advantages in its own way. The main issue we've found at the time of writing is that a few humans can spawn into a match unfairly close to the klowns – something that hopefully can and will be patched out by the time you read this. Even with that annoyance, though, you'd be Pennywise to grab a few friends and try this funfair for yourself. **Luke Kemp**

> The agility and sneakiness of human characters balances well with the klowns' abilities.

Seeing a klown waddle towards you induces panic; *being* the waddling klown is a rush.



Bosses and other missions, like target practice, treasure hunts, and chases, provide some nice variety.

MultiVersus – Rifts

Short-burst fun for lone players

INFO **FORMAT** PS5, PS4 **PUB** WB Games
DEV Player First Games **YEAR** 2022

These days it can be pretty hard to find a bite-size game to hop in and out of and enjoy when you've got just 30 minutes or an hour spare. MultiVersus' Rifts – single-player sequences of battles against AI, added as part of the game's relaunch – has become a strong contender.

Each Rift has a theme. For example, Multiversal Mayhem! focusses on the Joker, while Jason Vs Multiverse puts the eponymous serial killer in the centre of the frame. You're rewarded for completing challenges, and if you're a completionist that will definitely keep you coming back to the Rift. While the lower difficulties are way too easy, higher ones like 'Crushing', 'Insanity', and beyond do require quite a bit of strategy and skill.

Rifts provide the perfect balance of being memorable but not lasting so long that you'll feel trapped in the game. You'll never find yourself watching the clock tick down as you're caught in a fight or cutscene right when you need to be doing something else, like leaving the house. With each fight being separate from the others, you can take on Joker or Bugs and simply leave if you don't have time to finish the Rift off completely.

Then, upon returning, you can hop back in and spend an hour or so over a few evenings working your way through the current Rifts to earn some rewards or just to enjoy the game's excellent fighting mechanics. Because you can make it as challenging or as easy as you like, spamming attack buttons or trying to take on the AI on the highest difficulty, it's a real 'comfort food' experience, and you will return for more. **Echo Apsey**

> The perfect balance of being memorable but not lasting so long that you'll feel trapped.

DIGITAL OFFER

FOR PRINT SUBSCRIPTION DEALS, TURN TO PAGE 80

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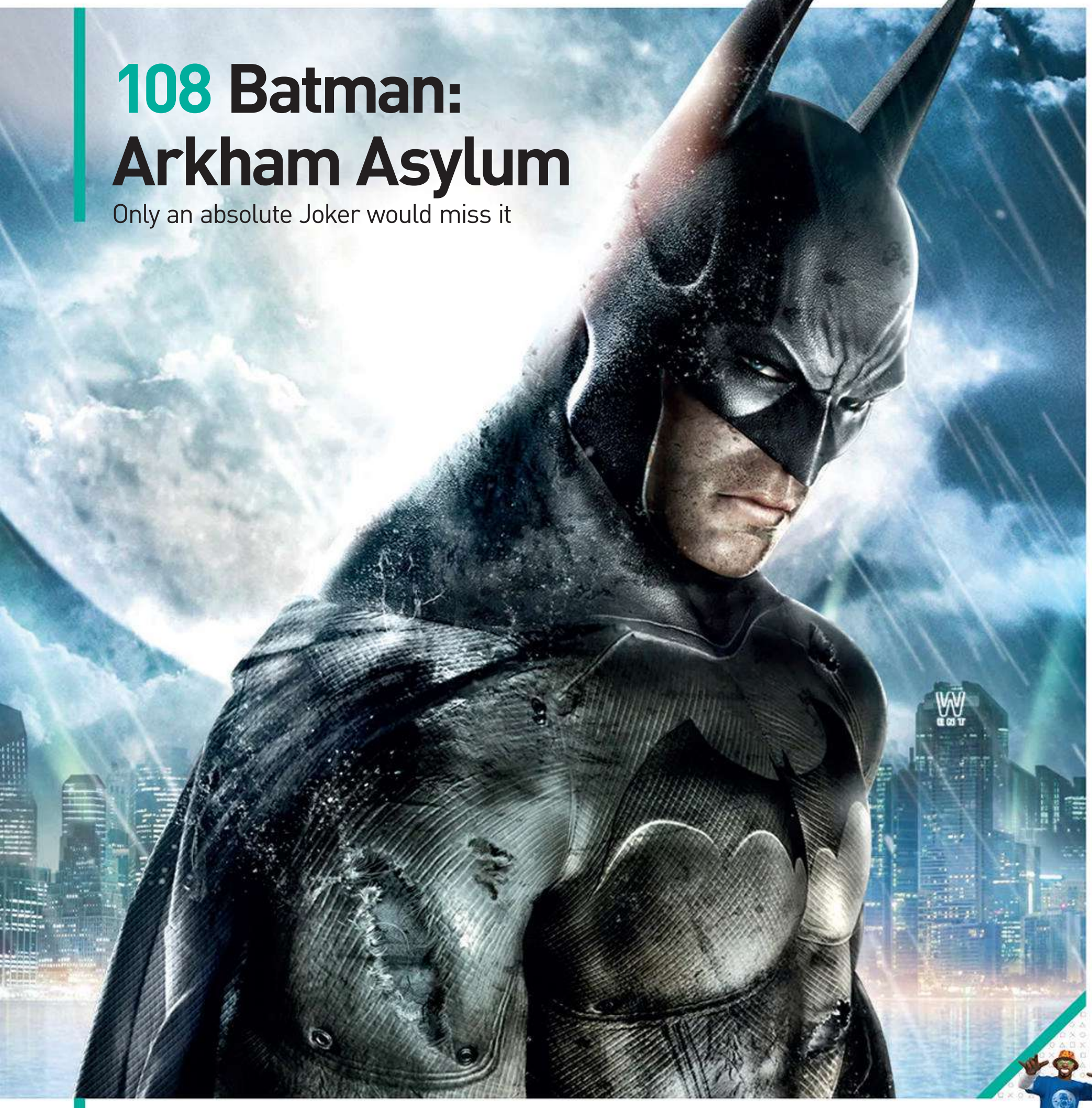
RetroStation

108 Batman: Arkham Asylum

Only an absolute Joker would miss it



HIGHLIGHTS

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF... PIRATES 113 | PARTING SHOT: TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND 114

DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these historical August moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

5 YEARS

In August 2019, Sony announced it was acquiring Marvel's Spider-Man developer Insomniac Games. Nothing for gamers to lose sleep over – the studio went on to make Miles Morales, and currently has Marvel's Wolverine in the works.

10 YEARS

Now almost a horrible urban legend in its own right, P.T. – 'playable teaser' – was released by Kojima Productions to whet players' appetites for Silent Hills. Alas, the latter game got cancelled and P.T. removed from the PS Store. Some things are *too* scary.

15 YEARS

Wolfenstein arrived on PS3 in 2009, allowing a new generation of players to experience the joys of punching Nazis as hero BJ Blazkowicz. "A big, dumb, action movie blast," we called it. And that was a very good thing.

MEMORY CARD

Batman: Arkham Asylum

15 years!? Holy depressing passing of time, Batman!

You'd be angry too if you'd been in the awful Batman: Rise Of Sin Tzu on PS2.

There was a time when seeing Batman on the front of a game box was about as welcome as discovering your blind date was Killer Croc. Batman starred in some truly *awful* games on PS2, and after a promising-looking open-world game based on Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight was sadly cancelled, it started to look like ol' Bats was cursed to never star in a classic videogame ever again.

But then, like a grown man in a chiroptera costume suddenly diving from the sky to save the day, developer Rocksteady swooped in with arguably the greatest Batman game *ever*: Batman: Arkham Asylum. "Still the best Arkham game in my opinion," raves reader **Nicholas Thieme**. "It was almost a horror game thanks to the fantastic atmosphere, story, and cast. To me, it's the perfect Batman game."

A hot take worthy of Firefly? Hardly, as our readers couldn't wait to rave about this Bat-classic. "Amazing story and voice cast and the gameplay was magnificent," says **Sam Bean**. "It made me love the Batman series again." For the four readers who haven't played it, what's so good about it? Well, Batman has caught the Joker and has kindly escorted him to the infamous psychiatric hospital, wherein Joker finally gets the therapy he needs and becomes a stable member of societ... oh, wait. Actually, the Joker takes over the asylum and Batman is forced to take it back, fighting a series of iconic Bat-villains along the way.

Great combat, great stealth, great performances, great boss figh... well, actually, the boss fights are rubbish. But the rest of the game easily makes up for it. "Superb," agrees **Jon Gates**. "City is still the definitive Batman game, with Asylum and Knight very, very close behind."

Gamers debate this all the time: did this excellent series lose something when it became less linear? Some of our readers believe it was a necessary step to inspire some of the great superhero games we have today. "Batman walked so Spidey and Miles could run," says **Cecil Davison**. Hear hear!

Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

MEMORY CARD

INFO

PUB Warner Bros

DEV Rocksteady Studios

RELEASED ON PS3

RELEASE 2009

IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS...
Batman: Arkham Origins is massively underrated and available to stream on PlayStation Plus. Give it a try!

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

240
Optional Riddler challenges to complete throughout the game. We'll never understand how that berk finds the time, to be honest.

01
Glitch that causes the game to reload from the start. But don't panic! It's actually one of the game's smartest ideas...

92
Its score on Metacritic! Let's be kind and not look up the score for Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League.

DEFENDING

James Heller

Aleksha McLoughlin believes Sgt James Heller is widely misunderstood and has real depth

This is not the homecoming he was expecting: experienced soldier Sergeant James Heller returns to a ravaged New York City only to be greeted by the deaths of his wife and daughter. The worst part? He's technically the reason why they stayed and waited for him, and that's a lot of guilt to carry.

It's fair to say that it was a bitter pill for fans of the original Prototype to swallow; that game's protagonist, Alex Mercer, had risked his life to stop a nuclear weapon from levelling what remained of New York Zero's Red Zone, after all. In Prototype 2 you play as a new man charged with taking Mercer down, a real inversion of player expectations.

James Heller's initial actions and key motivations are simple: to kill Alex Mercer and avenge the deaths of his wife and daughter. However, he gets far more than he bargained for when Mercer essentially 'recruits' him into the viral network by infecting him with a small sliver of Gentek's protogenic poison. In an instant, the vivid demise of his family, as well as the connected and collective suffering of millions more, washes over him. His mission becomes grislier: yes, Mercer must die, but Gentek, Blackwatch, and everyone responsible for manufacturing the virus and releasing it onto the population is equally at fault.

With as downbeat a setup as that, it's understandable that James Heller isn't exactly going to be the most fun protagonist to pilot through the roughly ten-hour adventure. Yes, he's angry, and of course he utters profanities the way that most of us use adjectives, but wouldn't *you* be upset if everything you knew came crashing down?

> "TRUTH IS, I WENT THERE TO DIE. BUT SOMEONE HAD OTHER PLANS, THEN I DISCOVERED THE TRUTH."

Turns out Heller gets much more than he bargained for, and the truth has many layers.

INFO

MAIN GAMES
Prototype 2 (2012)

STATS
James Heller is voiced by Cornell Womack, who also voiced characters in GTA, True Crime, and Manhunt 2.

Unlike Alex Mercer, who was a corpse possessed by the virus, James Heller always remained in control.

The game's art director started with Heller's angry eyes before deciding on his name, face, and race.

SPIN-OFFS
N/A

HOW TO PLAY?
PS Store, £29.99

CLASSIC GAME

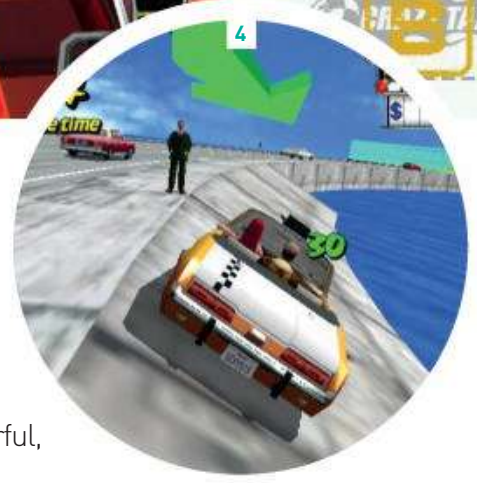
Crazy Taxi

Gotta go crazy in Sega's arcade classic

1

2

3



4

1 Driving passengers to locations with real-world brands was a big appeal. 2 Max the bonus time added by arriving at your destination speedily. 3 You need to have earned at least $5,000 to get a Class S and the credits. 4 Original mode's city is much more sprawling. 5 Sick of being a cabbie? Test your skills in Crazy Box challenges!

Sega's loss in the console business would be PlayStation's gain, and would give more players the chance to experience its games. While the Sonic developer hedged its bets with the other platforms, it assured players that Crazy Taxi would the first Sega title to come to PS2 – mere months after announcing its decision to exit the hardware business to become a third-party developer and publisher.

A fine choice it was too, as this wacky racer had already been a hit in the arcades for two years, and was a perfect example of the kind of innovative titles Sega was pulling out all the stops to make during its short-lived Dreamcast era. For a start, it wasn't just another track racer like Sega Rally or Daytona USA but an urban driving game in which you pick up passengers and then race to their destinations before the time runs out, racking up tips by performing 'crazy' stunts along the way and trying not to ruin your combo by crashing.

Much of the charm came from the setting: a busy city inspired by San Francisco, complete with steep streets and tramways. Sega also had licences with real-world brands – you'd be driving passengers to KFC, Tower Records, or the Levi's Store. This was matched by the anarchic punk vibes evoked by the very fitting soundtrack featuring songs from US punk rockers Bad Religion and The Offspring, the latter's 'All I Want' and its catchy shouty 'Ya Ya Ya Ya Ya!' every bit as iconic as Sega's own voice intro from the 16-bit era.

Still, under all that trendy surface, it's all about the driving, knowing the fastest route to your destination, and all the tricks you can do en route to rack up the fare, from driving past other cars to drifting around tight corners, as well as making use of the purposely placed ramps so you can perform a Crazy Jump. It's colourful, riotous fun that's easy to pick up and play for a frantic few minutes at a time.

CABBING FEVER

Within those minutes comes a real mastery, so the faster you get your fares to their destination, the more bonus time you get. That adds up over time, allowing you to play for much longer in a single session (the home port does however let you pick fixed time limits too). There are also many hidden tricks, the most useful being to let the taxi cruise then quickly shift back into drive gear and hit accelerate at the same time for a Crazy Dash. It's also about learning which fares to pick up, as a colour-coded system gives you an idea of a destination's distance – the further it is from where you pick your passenger up, the bigger the pay. The most rewarding part of keeping that forward momentum is when you realise the city isn't open world but more technically a loop that you can just keep racing indefinitely. Perhaps you'll even earn enough to be awarded the elusive 'Crazy' licence!

While the home port had extra content, including an additional stage (admittedly arguably not as interesting as the original arcade one) as well as a series of short challenges in a mode called Crazy Box, its excellent replay value was probably still a bit of a hard sell when you could pick up the highly acclaimed GTA III that same year. You'd think, then, that a budget release on PSN years later would have fared better, though unfortunately the later digital port lacked a lot of the original's charm, stripped of the real-world brands and the punk rock soundtrack.

> "It's all about the driving, knowing the fastest route to your destination, and all the tricks you can do to rack up the fare."

STILL CRAZY

But even if it's not so easy to play Crazy Taxi in its original form now, it nonetheless remains one of Sega's pure arcade classics, and even saw a Deliveroo-inspired spiritual successor in the form of minigame Crazy Delivery in Like A Dragon: Infinite Wealth. More surprising is that it's one of the classic IPs that Sega recently announced modern revivals for that's reportedly being developed as a 'triple-A' title. Presumably that means the new one will be a genuine open world, though how that would work is hard to comprehend. After all, even more than two decades later, nothing quite beats the pure unadulterated thrill of flooring the gas down those steep hills, racing for fares, with the soundtrack at full blast. It's all any of us should want. ■

INFO

PUB Acclaim Entertainment

DEV Hitmaker (port by Acclaim Studios Cheltenham)

RELEASED 2001

GET IT NOW Cex: £6 (PS2); PS Store: £6.49 (PS3)

NEED TO KNOW

1 Axel is named after Guns N' Roses' singer (the sequel had a driver named Slash).

2 Sega patented the arrow navigation system, leading to a lawsuit against The Simpsons: Road Rage.

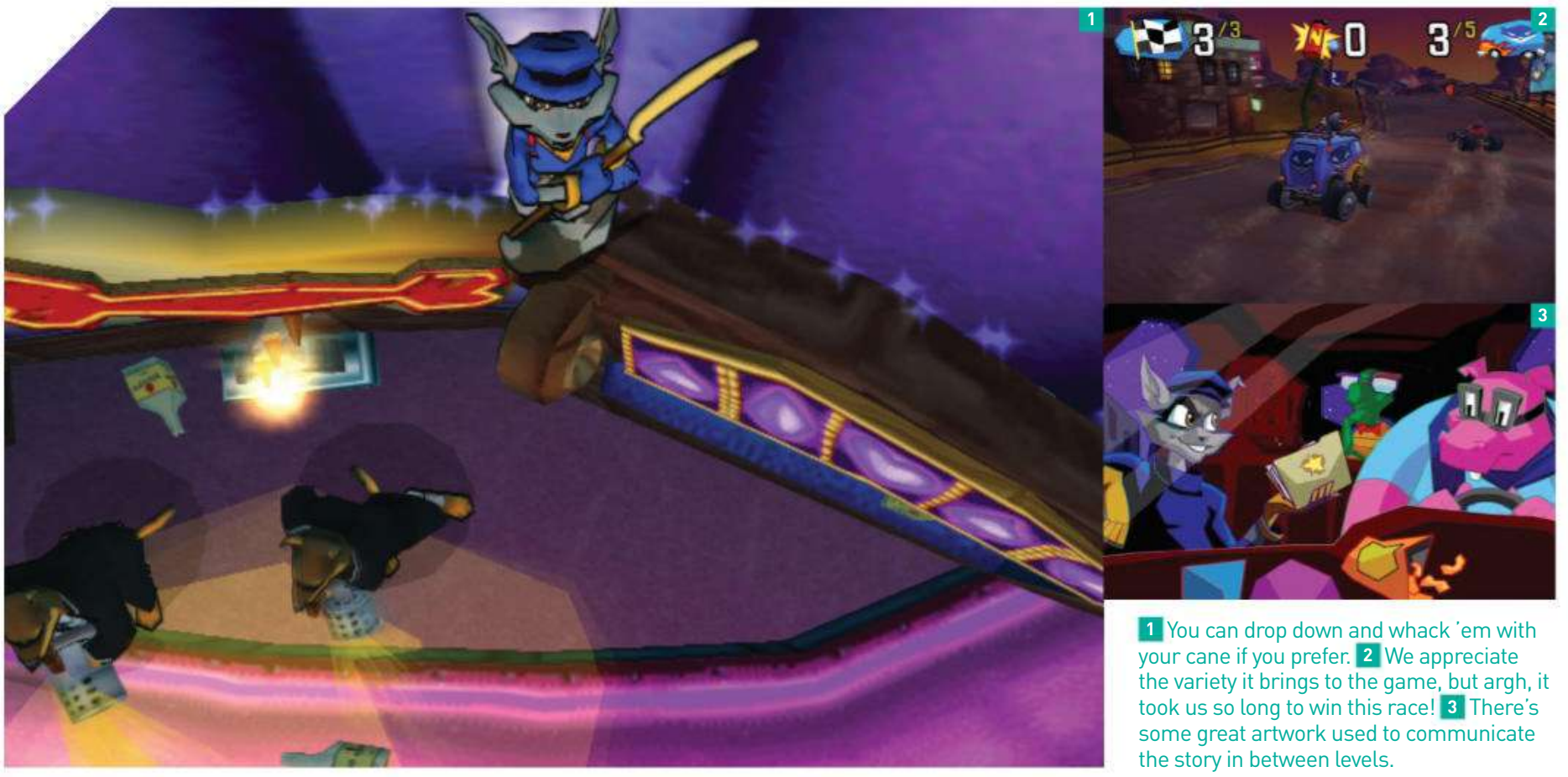
3 Bad Religion's 'Hear It', originally used on the driver select screen, plays in full in this version.

5

PLUS POINTS

Sly Raccoon

Take control of a raccoon? Bin there, done that



1 You can drop down and whack 'em with your cane if you prefer. 2 We appreciate the variety it brings to the game, but argh, it took us so long to win this race! 3 There's some great artwork used to communicate the story in between levels.

At this point, we're starting to believe Sony is using the PS Plus Game Catalogue to troll its audience; every month there seems to be another entry from a series that fans keep begging to be resurrected. And here we go again, another neglected icon! Let's remind ourselves of why Sly and the gang are so loved still.

Although the sequel refined and expanded the action, the first game was still pretty darn good, remaining an enjoyable classic to sneak back to in 2024. It's a platform adventure that, despite the thief-themed story and characters, doesn't involve an awful lot of stealth.[1] There *are* some sneaky bits, and there's a lot of clambering up and across ropes and ledges above the ground, but there's also an awful lot of smacking enemies in the face.

IT'S A STEAL

Sly brings one unwelcome blast from the past with him, though. Like in a lot of PS2 games, there's very noticeable motion blur here, something that is probably exacerbated by playing an SD game on an HD display. (You have the option to run either the NTSC or PAL version, but this is present in both.) It's something you can get used to surprisingly quickly, though we wish there was an option to turn it off.

The gooey goodness of the game itself is what really matters, and it's decent enough to save the day. Very of its time in some ways,[2] the movie-style presentation and surprising gameplay variety keep things fresh throughout. The sexualisation of the female fox police inspector is a bit weird, though.

Unlike in future games, you'll die if you take a single hit here (unless you've collected some 'charms'). Usually this feels fair, but boss fights can be teeth-gnashingly infuriating because of this. Don't forget about this emulated rerelease's rewind feature, then, nor the fact that this was originally released back in the days when games still had cheat codes...

INFO

PUB Sony
DEV Sucker Punch
RELEASED 2002

FOOTNOTES 1 Blue sparkles tend to mark what narrow opportunities there are. **2** Characters chatting with Sly will say things like "Use the ⊗ button to jump!"

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

"FANTASTIC GAMES, PLAYED THEM ALL, BUT IT TOOK ME GOING BACK AND PLAYING ON PS3 TO COMPLETE ALL OF THEM."
Peter Vitale

"DOPE GAME SIMPLE AS THAT"
Royce L BanSaiga

"NEED A REMASTER OR A NEW GAME"
Jerry Ancheta

▷ The final Jak game arrives: we check in with PSP's **Daxter**

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

Pirates

It seems they've always had us hooked

Pirates: The Legend Of Black Kat (PS2, 2002) was developed by Westwood Studios, known for Command & Conquer.

Adventure Time: Pirates Of The Enchiridion (PS4, 2018) sees the land of Ooo flooded, giving the game a piratey flavour.

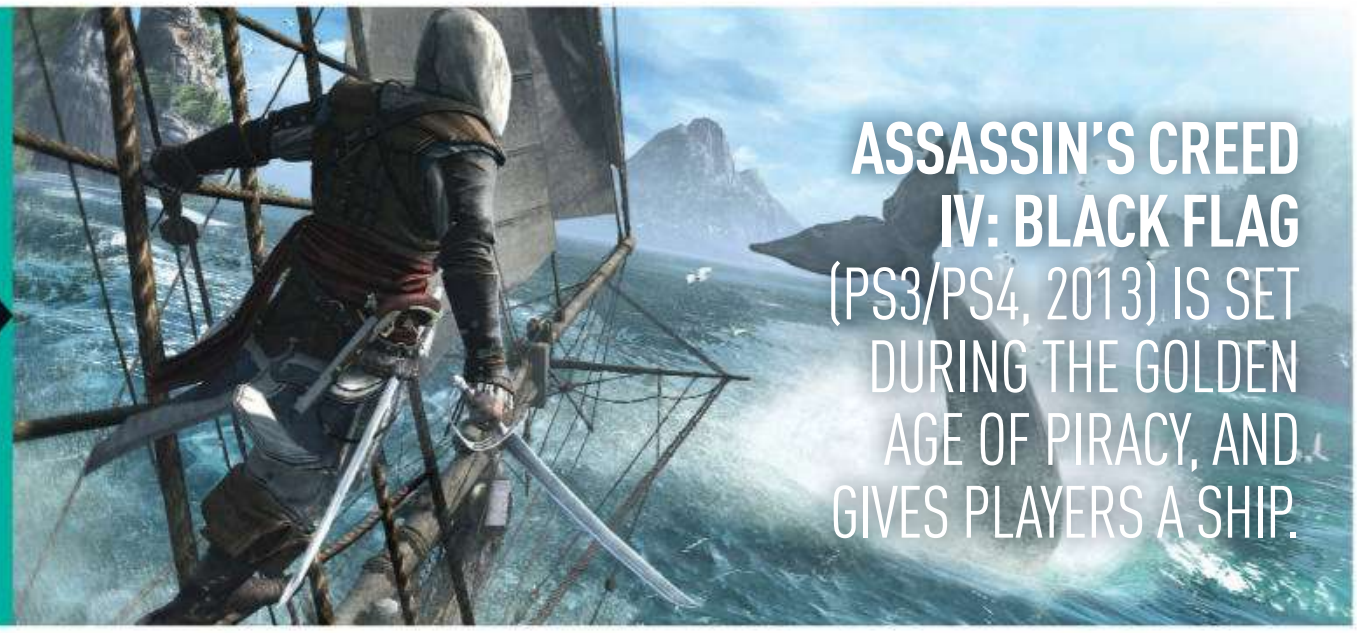
Before its 2017 PS4 release, One Piece: Unlimited World Red saw Luffy and crew on PS3 and PS Vita in 2014.

Bugs Bunny: Lost In Time featured a pirate Yosemite Sam. Shantae And The Pirate's Curse first came out on Nintendo 3DS. **Rayman 2: The Great Escape (PS1) had robot space pirates!** Overboard! was called Shipwreckers! in the US.

FEELING GROGGY

Not-so-jolly Roger

Development of Skull And Bones began in *2013* – it was originally going to be a multiplayer expansion for Black Flag. It then shifted to an MMO spin-off known as Black Flag Infinite, until it morphed into a new IP unrelated to Assassin's Creed. Skull And Bones then had a launch date of some time in 2018... then 2019... then 2020... then 2022... then 2023... and finally launched in 2024.



ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG (PS3/PS4, 2013) IS SET DURING THE GOLDEN AGE OF PIRACY, AND GIVES PLAYERS A SHIP.

Swashbuckling Cervantes has featured in Soulcalibur since PS1's Soul Edge.

Rogue Galaxy (PS2, 2005) features not merely pirates, but *space* pirates.

Pirates Of The Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest was a 2006 PSP tie-in for the Disney movie. We have to admit, neither was much good.

Port Royale 3: Pirates & Merchants (PS3, 2012) features not just piracy, but ship-based trading, and even building a global business empire.

MONKEY BUSINESS

He's just a little Guybrush

The first Monkey Island game came out in 1990, but PlayStation didn't get a taste of it until Escape From Monkey Island hit PS2 in 2001. It's the fourth and, without a doubt, worst game in the series. It was an unfortunate swan song for LucasArts, but typically sharp writing and acting make it worth struggling through the mechanics.

▷ Next issue: kicking off a match through the ages with **sports**!

#43

A legend comes home

Tomb Raider: Legend takes Lara to England, where everyone has a jolly good time

FORMAT PS2 / **PUB** EIDOS INTERACTIVE / **DEV** CRYSTAL DYNAMICS / **RELEASED** 2006

Dark, dingy, and the weather is tempestuous. Welcome to England. To enter Professor Worth's King Arthur Museum, Lara Croft tugs on a shoddy replica of the sword in the stone. A grainy recording booms: "Enter, once and future king! Merlin deems you worthy!" This Cornish visitor attraction may appear more Silent Hill than Avalon, but it's certainly got character.

Museums in games are often grand affairs, but not this one; it's kitsch in the extreme and a far cry from the exotic locales Lara's been to so far. Worth's is a derelict tourist trap full of rickety dioramas that take you through a crude retelling of Arthurian legend. Cursed-looking animatronic figures re-enact famous scenes, including Arthur and Merlin wobbling dangerously in front of Excalibur – which looks about as impressive as an overgrown splinter.

It's offbeat, endearing, and provides a platform for Lara's playful nature to shine. As she interacts with the unstable exhibits, her witty repartee with her remote team is reminiscent of that between friends or family on a budget trip that no-one asked for but inadvertently becomes the most memorable. Every display drives research assistant Alister closer to the brink, as he's teased by Lara and tech-whizz Zip for his gripes about historical inaccuracies. Arthurian mythology and family are at the heart of Lara's legend, so it's fitting that her quest brings her home – in a fun, unexpectedly relatable moment with familial banter.

TIME TO PLAY? England is the sixth stage and a late-game turning point in Lara's journey to uncover the truth behind her mother's disappearance. Tracing a map found on a knight's shield in Kazakhstan, Lara's back in her homeland on the cusp of a legendary discovery.

NEXT MONTH

ON SALE 21 AUGUST

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

Shining a light on the Japan-set adventure

PLAY

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